

10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

10¢

NOVEMBER



TEN FICTION BULL'S EYES!

TWO NOVELS

◎ **GUN RIDER FOR
THE OVERLAND**

by **CHARLES W. TYLER**

◎ **WAR SMOKE ON THE
SANTE FE TRAIL**

by **TOM W. BLACKBURN**

NOVELETTE

◎ **HOT LEAD RANSOMS
THE SLASH T**

by **MORGAN LEWIS**

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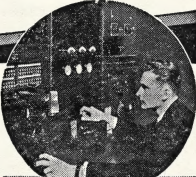
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

NEXT ISSUE
ON SALE
NOVEMBER 11TH

VOLUME XIX

NOVEMBER, 1942

NUMBER 4

2—Complete Novels—2

WAR SMOKE ON THE SANTA FE TRAIL... Tom W. Blackburn 11

Though Apache knives and renegade guns blocked every pass ahead, there could be no turning back for Bill Levering's wagon train. For the strong, restless young nation at his back was crying for a man who could blaze the way—through the Desert of Death to Santa Fe!

GUN RIDER FOR THE OVERLAND..... Charles W. Tyler 42

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KING OF THE RANGE..... Tom Roan 69

A royal black stallion and his herd, chosen by God to roam the wilds untamed, fell into a trap of human wolves—and the only way out was Death!

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Western Feature

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THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU



AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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A Code for Americans

IN THE words of one Funeral Bill Brayton, a man who knew about such things, "there ain't a game been invented yet that cain't be beat." He was talking about a sheep-cattle war in early Arizona, after he'd cut himself in on the losing side—but they are words we would all do well to remember today.

We have a tough winter ahead of us. Already there are shortages in many of the appurtenances of living that we have considered necessities in the past—food, clothing, fuel. The reports from the fighting fronts have brought grief to many American homes. Sometimes we may be inclined to think that we have taken on a combination of enemies, in this War of 1942, that cannot be whipped.

The sorrows and sacrifices and moments of despair have already reached deeply into our way of living. They will be felt far more keenly before this hard winter is out. And it is going to take more courage and solid faith than America has ever before been called on to give, in order to remember that we *have* to win this war. We *can't* let our country fall. By working for the single goal, together, we can win—and we are going to. We have to remember that.

Funeral Bill Brayton, the Westerner we mentioned above, knew all the odds were against him when he pitched in on the side of the Pleasant Valley sheepmen. He was a cowman, by dress and inclination, but he was in with the outnumbered woolie crowd after he went to the aid of wounded Rance Akers, the valley's leading sheep rancher. And when old Akers, shot in the back, tried to tell Funeral Bill that they couldn't hope to win the fight against the cowmen's hired gun-slingers, red-headed Bill told him quietly, "There ain't a game that cain't be beat," and he set out to prove it.

First there was the matter of getting a doctor for Akers. The only doctor in the only nearby village, Pleasanttown, was owned, body, soul, and medicine kit, by the O'Gorman faction, the warring cowmen. But Bill vowed he'd bring the medico back to patch up Akers' punctured hide.

The story of Funeral Bill Brayton and the Pleasant Valley sheep war is a novellette by M. Howard Lane, and it's slated for next month's *10 Story Western*. We'd like to quote a page or two, after Funeral Bill's arrival in Pleasanttown:

It would be dark, once he was past this cluster of business buildings, and if folks didn't pay him too much attention he could reach Doctor Newt Manning's house without being observed.

Quietly, Funeral Bill cursed himself for not having sought a back alley that would have led him to Manning's place. However, he hadn't expected to draw so much attention. Idle figures were sliding through the batwings to the porch of the Elkhorn now. All wore guns at their hips, and all were watching him.

Those silent watchers on the Elkhorn porch made no move to stop him as he rode on past them, but he felt the flesh along his back start to crawl once they were behind him. He blessed the old cowhide vest and faded levis he was wearing. In any other garb, lead might even now be reaching out to tag him, for it was plain that O'Gorman was set to use his gunhands for murder now. The bushwhack attack on Akers proved that.

A steep-roofed white house, shaded by towering poplars, appeared out of the darkness to the left. From a description Akers had given him, Bill recognized it as Doctor Manning's office-home. He rode on past the house, then circled back to groundhitch Pancho alongside the medico's stable.

Spurs jingling softly, he moved along one wall of the house, seeing a crack of light beneath a curtained window. Climbing to the dark porch, Funeral Bill rapped on the door. He heard steps inside, and then the portal opened.

Lamp held shoulder-high in one hand, a round-bellied man in suspenders and shirt sleeves peered out. Bill saw an expression of relief cross his face, and he realized ironically that the doctor probably had been half expecting to see Akers standing here.

Funeral Bill had put his left arm behind him so the other couldn't see it. "I got a hand," he drawled, "that needs fixin'—and the dinero to pay for it."

"Come on in then," Doctor Manning said. "We'll take care of you in a jiffy."

He moved back into the hall, and Funeral Bill followed him to the room where he'd seen the crack of light. A medical book lay open on a desk. A bottle of whiskey and a glass stood beside it.

"Take my own medicine sometimes," Manning gestured toward the bottle with a laugh. "Now—" he set the lamp down on the corner of the desk—"let's see that hand." He turned as he spoke, and his speech ended with a startled, "Ulp!"

His round, watery blue eyes bulged as he stared into the muzzle of one of Funeral Bill's Colts. The brim of Bill's battered sombrero

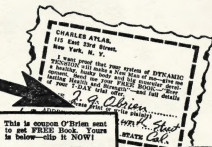
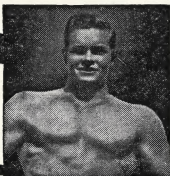
(Concluded on page 8)

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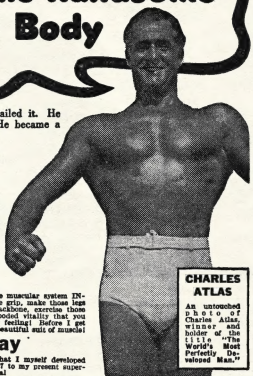
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(Continued from page 6)

cast the flat planes of his face into shadow, save for the straight line of his mouth.

There was iron in Bill's voice as the gun held the medico motionless. "Grab your bag, doc. We're taking a ride."

Doctor Manning licked flabby lips. His eyes looked stunned as they swept over the red-headed gunhand. "You—you look like a cattleman," he stuttered. "There's no call to scare me half to death with that gun."

"What I look like and what I am is a hoss of two different colors," Bill told him flatly. "Fact is, it even surprises me some to learn that I've done turned stinkin' sheepherder."

A sick look was coming over Doctor Manning's face. "Wh—who is hurt?" he managed to ask.

Funeral Bill chuckled without humor. It was easy to see that the medico knew of the attempt that had been made on Rance Akers' life. "I'll give you just one guess," he grunted. "A-Akers?"

"You're a good guesser. Grab your bag."

The doctor reached shakily for the whiskey bottle on his desk.

"Leave that stuff alone!" Bill snapped. "Bottled courage ain't going to help you none."

Five minutes later, with Bill pacing tall and stoically behind him, Doctor Newt Manning pushed open the squeaky back door of his house and stepped out to a small rear porch, roofed and completely dark.

Spurs that weren't his own jingled lightly in the dark, and Bill swung like a cat toward the sound.

A voice came from the thick darkness to his right: "Night air ain't good for you, Doc. Get back in the house. You, too, cowboy!"

Bill started back toward the porch. It was his only chance. "We—we'll go back," he said in simulated fear and surprise as his pantherish strides carried him forward.

"He's coming at you!" the doctor cried out. "Get him—"

Funeral Bill leaped, the long barrel of his

right-hand Colt slashing into the blinding darkness ahead of him. He heard the click of a gun-hammer being eared back, and the slithering sound of a man side-stepping, and then the slashing steel in his own hand struck.

Shock running the length of his arm, Bill reached out with his left hand to steady the crumpling body of the guard. He lowered the man gently to the porch, conscious that the cocked gun in the other's fist would explode if it struck hard. And one gunshot from here would bring investigators in a hurry.

"Did you get that cussed sheepherder?" the medico called.

Bill couldn't take a chance on panicking the fellow into running or yelling. "Got him," he grunted, and he hoped his voice sounded like the guard's.

"Good, good," Manning said gleefully. "Tell O'Gorman on your way back uptown that Rance Akers is still alive—"

"And going to stay that way," Funeral Bill murmured gently in his normal voice. He was back at the doctor's side now, and the muzzle of his Colt rammed viciously against the flesh layering the medico's ribs. . . .

That's one time Funeral Bill Brayton made good his brag. He needed a doctor for his friend Akers, and he got one, O'Gorman's gun-guards notwithstanding. That was only the beginning of his actionful career in Pleasant Valley, in Lane's story, "The Redemption of Funeral Bill," but it serves to demonstrate the code by which he worked.

Whether in the 1880's or the 1940's, his is a fighting code for Americans who have a tough job to do: "There, ain't a game been invented yet that cain't be beat."

THE EDITOR



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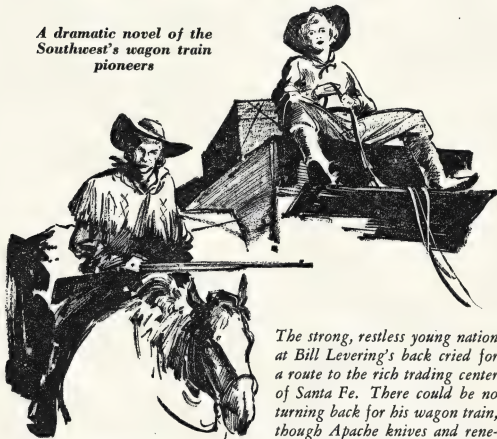
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WAR SMOKE ON THE SANTA FE TRAIL

By Tom W. Blackburn

A dramatic novel of the Southwest's wagon train pioneers



CHAPTER ONE

Affair of Honor

IN THE year 1826, word spread loosely through the wide, unsettled area west of the muddy Missouri, that on July 4th, the anniversary of the ratification of the document by which they had made a new nation fifty years before, two old men had died. The passing of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams on the same day made little mark in the vast new country known as Kansas Territory. But news which came out from Fort Leavenworth, that on the headwaters of the northern Rio

The strong, restless young nation at Bill Levering's back cried for a route to the rich trading center of Santa Fe. There could be no turning back for his wagon train, though Apache knives and renegade guns blocked every pass ahead—with death for all!

Grande were wide valleys and rich streams, fur and land and wealth, traveled swiftly and put many men of many types in the saddle.

Among these, riding up to the stockade of Fort Leavenworth while talk of Santa Fe and the Rio Grande Del Norte was still fresh on most men's lips at the new army post, was Bill Levering. Born in Missouri, in the wagon of Indiana farmers west-bound for new land, and raised with his eyes turned always westward toward

the haze of blue mountains beyond the short-grass plains, the tumult of Leavenworth was a tocsin to Levering's ears.

Picketing his horse on the river bank below the post and parking his gear in the big trading-store the powerful Charblanc family had already established within the peeled-pole stockade, Bill swung off to find the commandant.

Colonel Geraghty was a friend of Bill's father, a man he remembered out of his boyhood. He found the officer at the west gate, hunkered down with a dirty Kaw

conditions in the Arkansas valley. Squatting down beside Geraghty, who was struggling hopelessly with the thick Kaw tongue, Bill spoke swiftly to the Indian facing him.

The Kaw looked up in astonishment, grinned his delight, and answered, "The



white chief wants to know if the Kaw will fight when wagons go up the Arkansas. He does not understand what I tell him. The Kaw will fight no wagons which do

among the Kaw nation: "White men are all fools, anyway!"

The Indian stood up, his grin widening. "Brother, it is the truth," he said, giving



Once he felt the hot, searing sting of a bullet crease. But he held on. . . .

not stop and break ground in Kaw country. But there will be fight for wagons which go up the valley beyond the Kaw lands. There will be much fight. The Apache have a chief named Cuchillo, the Knife. He will fight them. If the white men do not keep their wagons here on the Muddy River, they are fools!"

Bill nodded and repeated a saying

his answer to the saying, and he moved away.

Bill turned to the officer at his side.

Geraghty came to his feet, staring at the leather man closely. "You know what he said? Exactly what he said?"

Bill nodded and repeated the Indian's warning.

"That's the devil of getting old—now, your face. . . ." Geraghty paused uncertainly. "Hold on, I've got it! Bill—Bill—Levering of Missouri!" He thrust out his hand.

Bill answered the strong grip, but he shook his head. "No, sir," he corrected. "Levering of Kansas."

Geraghty laughed. "Sure! Man, am I glad to see you! Why is it when anything opens up, a pack of trail-wolves jump in before the thing's even out of the bag? There's been scouts in here aplenty the last day or two, some of Rene Charblanc's men, too, but I couldn't trust 'em. They'd be all right till a chance of big profit came along, then the rules'd go overboard and the whole works'd turn renegade!"

"New country and gold strikes and land-rushes seem to do that to some men. I don't know what you came in for, boy, but I'll wager it has to do with the new trail to Santa Fe. There's a big outfit in the post right now, waiting for a wagon captain before pushing on. If you want to throw in with something slow and uninteresting like bulling wagons down a seven hundred mile track, see me in the morning. I'll have it lined out so you can look it over."

The colonel turned away as a subaltern hailed him across the compound. Bill watched him go, with amusement. The years had thickened Geraghty's body and slowed his movements, but he was still a fighting man. Tomorrow he'd see about this train of wagons. If it was a good outfit, there'd be more gamble to getting it through than the colonel realized, particularly if he wasn't exaggerating his complaint of trail-wolves. There was nothing dull about bulling a train of wagons through renegade country.



CROWDED a dozen times beyond its capacity, noisy and dusty and evil-smelling, Fort Leavenworth was no place in which to sleep. Bill retrieved his gear from Charblanc's store,

unpicked his pony and moved downriver a pair of miles to a little cove where it was quiet and the air was clean. He was swimming in this cove shortly after dawn the next morning when four men tramped out onto a sandy bar a hundred yards upstream.

Among them, he recognized Rene Charblanc, eldest of the brothers in the famous trading family, and a trapper named Beaver Thorsen whom Bill had known on the Platte Fork. It became obvious in a moment that the two Bill did not know were the challenger and challenged in a duel that was about to be staged. He swam hastily ashore and began to dress.

On the bar above, the regulation fifteen paces were measured off. Charblanc and Thorsen examined the weapons to be used. The two duelists took their positions. The ready call was given as Bill pulled on his second moccasin. He saw the rest of it very clearly.

The hat dropped. Thorsen's man raised his gun upward in the full sweep of formal presentation, as required by custom before firing. Charblanc's man, however, pivoted his gun with practiced ease at the hip and fired before the other's weapon was half-raised. The stricken man fell forward without a sound. Charblanc and his principal bent over him callously, as though to make certain of the finality of the wound, then moved off into the brush toward the post.

Beaver Thorsen was still standing over the dead man when Bill reached him. When he saw Bill, he began to swear sulphurously.

"I'm the one-eyed son of a half-grown tadpole and a bow-backed tree-toad!" he moaned. "I've got less sense than a damned spruce hen! Look what I let them devils do! And I never made a move!"

"Quit squealing, Beaver," Bill rapped at him. "What is this game, anyway? That was the dirtiest shot I've ever seen."

"I ain't squealing Levering," Thorsen protested. "I'm hot an' I can't do anything about it! Know who this corp is? No? Well, I'll tell you. He's Emory Fenwick. He's got eighteen wagons of merchandise and a pretty sister, all of which he aimed to freight to Santa Fe. Soon's Colonel Geraghty found him a trail cap-

tain, we was ready to pull up stakes.

"Last night this quick-shooting St. John jigger hit Fenwick up in Charblanc's place for that captain job. Fenwick refers him to Geraghty. St. John makes some remarks about a kid that can't do his own hiring. The kid's sister's name gets mixed into the talk somehow. First thing I know, Fenwick's challenged St. John to a duel and I'm rung in as his second. That's when I should have put my boot down and squawked to the colonel. But I didn't. And now look!"

Levering didn't need to look. He could see it plainly enough. Eighteen wagons of merchandise was a big stake. This was what Geraghty had been hinting at when he'd talked about renegades and rules that would go overboard. There was already trouble in Leavenworth. There would be more along the trail to the south. . . .

Geraghty was no smiling, eager man, when Levering and Thorsen carried in the dead man and reported the duel. His face was sombre and heavy as he listened

to the post surgeon, who had completed his examination of Fenwick's body.

"The man who fired that shot knows as much about anatomy as I do, Colonel," the doctor said. "He couldn't have put his bullet more cleanly or certainly into a vital spot. I doubt if Fenwick knew what hit him."

Geraghty grunted and turned an accusing stare at Beaver Thorsen and Levering.

"You could see what was coming, Thorsen," he charged. "You could have stopped it. And Bill, you could have gotten up onto the bar from where you were a sight faster."

Thorsen shrugged. "Now, looky, Colonel," he protested. "You've got your fires up. A man that minds his own business in this country lives a spell. Otherwise, he don't. And you don't know these Fenwick sprouts. They had everything they owned sunk in this Santa Fe train, and they was headstrong. The gal's as bad as the kid, here. Maybe they'd listen to you, but not to Levering and me.

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4. CLEAN BLADE IN RAZOR BY COVERING SHARPENING TOOTH BRUSH IN HOT WATER AND CLEANING, REMOVING THE BLADE IS LIKELY TO DAMAGE THE EDGE

"I'm agreein' it ain't right, and it was a skunk's way of playing a gentleman's game, but it was a duel, which leaves Simon St. John and the Charblancs in the clear. It's a hard thing on that gal. She's alone now. But shucks, they's been dead men before along the Muddy!"

Geraghty spat. "I'm an Army man!" he swore. "Dead men don't turn my stomach, you bush-faced buffalo! It's the trail I'm worrying about. We'll never get a clean trail open to Santa Fe until we get goods down there, until there's a strong American trader established at that end, until trappers know they can bring their plevs into Santa Fe and trade 'em out with somebody of their own kind they can trust. The Fenwicks were those kind of traders and the goods they had were what is needed. Now it'll be a long wait before another trader fitted like them comes along."

Bill Levering scuffed a moccasin along the floor. "Maybe the Fenwick train will go through, anyhow. Way Beaver talks about Miss Louisa, she's got a lot of sand. Maybe she'll go on with it."

The colonel looked incredulous. "You've been out in the grass-country too long, Bill," he said. "You don't know how Charblanc will jump at a chance like this. Hell, in a day or two he'll scare that girl so badly she'll sell him everything she has at a loss. And he'll sell it again at his own price from his store here or at Westport or at one of his posts along the Republican. And being a Charblanc, he'll do it sly enough to beat the Army."

Bill shrugged. The colonel turned to other business. But Beaver Thorsen kept interested eyes on his fellow leather-man. They met outside a little later.

Thorsen nodded thoughtfully. "That's a fighting gal or I miss my guess. It might work, son, if'n we could wean her away from Charblanc."

"That can be done," Bill said.

CHAPTER TWO

Wagon Captain

BUT Bill Levering wasn't so sure when he found the girl down at her wagons. The death of her brother had smothered the flame Beaver had

boasted of. Shut in her wagon, she refused to talk to him until he told the driver that he knew who had killed her brother. She came to the opening of the tilt then, a tall, handsome girl with a white, strained face.

"Go away!" she said to him. "Stop talking about my brother. You know who killed him! You'll tell me a man named Simon St. John killed him in a duel on the river bank. But you'll be lying. This country killed him! This barren, bitter country, fit only for murderers and brigands! Colonel Geraghty killed him, luring us out here with everything we owned, so that you and the rest like you could buy what we had after he was gone for a tenth of what it cost! If you've got money you can bid for these wagons. If you haven't—get out."

Levering put his hat back on his head. "Your brother wasn't a quitter," he said quietly. "I saw him lift his gun against St. John. I saw him stick to the dueling code, even when he knew St. John would trick him and fire illegally. But he didn't back down. He stood on his mark and raised his gun when the signal was given . . . It is only seven hundred miles to Santa Fe. Your brother wanted his name over a storefront on the plaza there. So what?"

The girl's face tightened. She turned back into the wagon without a word. Bill shrugged and went back into the post. Thorsen met him expectantly, his face falling when he read failure in Bill's eyes. They crossed to the canteen and ordered drinks.

Thorsen grew thoughtful. "Time for opening the trail ain't ripe," he said slowly. "I figured it was, even with news of Cuchillo's Apaches runnin' wild in the breaks below Cottonwood Crossing. I figured it was, in spite of the Charblancs and their aim to keep the Santa Fe trade for themselves. But I was wrong, same's you and the Colonel was wrong. I'll give the gal my notice in the morning and I'll head back somewheres out on the Solomon for another season. If you'd come along, Bill—"

Levering nodded his head. They passed some other talk and made the gesture of looking over supplies at Charblanc's. Finally, before it began to grow dark,

they went back to the stables, intending to ride out to Bill's previous camp for the night.

As they entered the stable, a cottonwood log building, shadows converged from either side. Someone slammed the door shut behind them.

A taunting voice reached out: "So Fenwick was murdered, eh? So you gents saw it and you know it, eh? You've talked a mite too much, the boss says! Why, damn your rotten hides!"

The stable was dark, heavy with the smell of horses and the restless sound of animals in the stalls. The men ringing Beaver and him were invisible in the poor light. Their purpose was plain to Levering.

He whispered a sharp command to Thorsen, "Give 'em hell!" and plunged into action.

To his left he heard movement and the hiss of a swinging club. He leaped backward, caught the weapon as it slashed downward, and struck out savagely with it. He felt it strike and bite through bone. To his left, Thorsen swore loudly, and the sounds of a fierce struggle came from that direction.

Raising his club again, Levering circled cautiously. A little to one side, a man bumped into something. It was a small sound. Bill lashed out, missed, and struck again. A man screamed hoarsely and crashed against the wall. Bill moved in, but when he reached the spot the man was motionless on the floor.

Circling again, Bill bumped full into a man, took a jarring blow on his shoulder and lost his club. Reaching out with his good hand, he caught the fellow's throat and twisted him down across his knee. The man thrashed madly for a moment, then lay still. Somewhere in the dark interior of the stable a man was sobbing. Thorsen was still swearing. And near the door a man was beating against the wall and screaming. Bill moved in that direction, but before he reached the man, he found the door and threw it open, letting light into the darkness.

The stable was a shambles. Two men lay with their heads crushed by blows of the axe-handles with which they had intended to silence the two leather-men. Another lay throttled in the center of the

floor, and the man who scurried madly out the door bore the unmistakable marks of Beaver Thorsen's huge hands on his battered face. Beaver, himself, had a great cut across the top of his head. But he was soundly on his feet, and as his eyes caught the light he lumbered out the door after the escaping man. Bill followed him, rubbing at his numbed shoulder and arm to limber it.



A BITTER, raging anger burned in him. He overtook Thorsen's lumbering figure and was almost within reach of the last escaping attacker, when the man dodged between a pair of buildings and out onto the main street of the post. Levering piled after him—to find the man huddled in the center of a little circle formed of Rene Charblanc, Simon St. John, the Fenwick girl, and a driver from her wagons. Without breaking his stride, Levering lunged at the group, intending to break through to the man he was after and then punch him into a pulp.

St. John shoved forward, swinging his squat, powerful bulk into Bill's path. Side-stepping, Bill slammed his fist into the fugitive's face, driving him against the building at his back, and seized him by the collar. A sharp gasp from Louisa Fenwick spun him around in time to see St. John savagely reaching for the belt-gun with which he was so proficient.

It was a tight, deadly moment. Bill's motion gave him a chance. He wheeled without bringing himself to a stop, making as difficult a target as possible. At the same time he jerked his own gun free. St. John made the mistake of waiting for a spot shot. Levering's slug struck the man's gun-arm, ranging upward in a painful flesh wound. St. John bawled out angrily, dropping his weapon and clutching his injured arm.

"Never draw a gun on a Levering unless his back is turned or you're ready to die!" Bill ground out.

St. John backed up and turned down the street. Rene Charblanc turned also, unwillingly, under the weight of Levering's steady gun.

"You've built a big fire today, leather-

pants," the trader warned. "Be careful you don't burn all your wood up at once!"

Thorsen came loping through the passage between the buildings, caught the scene in a glance, and grinned widely. Levering was suddenly conscious that Louisa Fenwick was at his side, pulling at his injured arm.

"We'll have that Fenwick store at Santa Fe, Mister Levering," she said. "Tell my drivers when you're ready to leave. We'll be waiting."

Bill stared stupidly after her as she swung up the street toward Colonel Geraghty's office. Beaver Thorsen chuckled at his delight.

"I told you there was fight in that gal's blood!" he said.

* * *

Young Fenwick had built up a good train. His wagons were all new, thick-tired Murphys, complete to spare couplingbars swung under the running gear. His animals were carefully paired Missouri mules. And, for the most part, he had hired snag-toothed, leathery Missouri men to drive them.

Colonel Geraghty paraded Leavenworth's tiny garrison when they left. Shaking his hand, Levering saw how hard it was for the old soldier to trust the breaking through of this new trail, which was his dream, to somebody else.

"We'll keep this end open, son," Geraghty said. "The rest is up to you. But remember one thing. Those are fine, friendly folks at Santa Fe. They'll be glad to see you, and more so to see Miss Fenwick and her merchandise. Their furs have to go down twelve hundred miles of desert they call the Chihuahua Trail to Monterrey in Old Mexico. Their goods and supplies have to come back the same way. This trail of ours makes it easier for them to get what they need, and we can use their fur trade.

"There'll be trouble-makers in Santa Fe, Bill, just like there are in Leavenworth. Watch your men. Don't hold deviltry against the whole country any more than you hold your fracas with St. John against me and my soldiers."

Levering grinned. "You're forgetting I've been down to the foot of the Cimar-

ron Mountains, just across their divide from Santa Fe. I know those people. I even talk their lingo a little. We'll get along."

Geraghty nodded. "Good. Now, Rene Charblanc and St. John and two or three others have disappeared. Watch out for them. A couple of Charblanc's brothers are thought to be in Santa Fe already. And watch out for the Apache, Cuchillo, that the Kaw warned us against!"

Bill took the colonel's hand again. The garrison came to parade attention. Bill signaled Beaver Thorsen, far in the lead. The long bull-whips of the skimmers cracked and the wagons began to move. Louisa Fenwick, who had sat her horse apart from Geraghty and her wagon captain, rode up. A bright, hot light of pride was in her eyes as she looked out over the long line snaking southwest into the grass country.

"The Fenwicks have started for Santa Fe, Colonel!" she said.

Geraghty's scamed face brightened. "You're a brave girl, Miss Fenwick," he told her quietly. "Courage and the company you keep will finish the thing your brother started. I've done the best I can for you here. The rest is up to you—and Bill Levering!"

CHAPTER THREE

Renegade Alliance

AT PAWNEE ROCK, three hundred miles out, they found a dozen Kaw lodges. Levering pulled out of the camp circle into which the wagons were being drawn and rode toward the Indian fires. Among the hunters in the little camp was the same brave to whom he had spoken on his first day in Leavenworth. The Kaw seemed pleased to see him.

"That is a big train, brother," he said. "It will give the Apache much plunder. It will also gladden the hearts of the white men who wait for it."

Bill questioned the Indian.

"Three days ago two white men without wagons passed here. They wait at the forking of the trail at Mulberry Creek for a larger party to join them. They, also, go across the mountains and the dry de-

sert to the country of the black-haired ones."

Levering thanked the Kaw, knowing further questions were useless. He gave him a horn of powder, and led the way back to the horses. Louisa Fenwick, who had followed him out from their camp, was silent half of the way back to the wagons. Finally she spoke.

"He gave you some information?"

Bill chuckled. "That we'd be killed by the Apaches of Cuchillo and the wagons taken. But, more important, there's a pair of whites waiting up-river sixty miles for us."

The girl rode quietly for a little way. "Charblanc and St. John?" she guessed shrewdly after a time.

Bill stared at her in astonishment. Finally he nodded. "One of them, anyhow, with a partner, or a couple of their best men."

The girl shrugged. "Order our men to stay clear of them. Let them wait for another season and another train to cross with. Or let them cross alone. I'll not ferry enemies to Santa Fe!"

There was an answer to this, but Bill saved it. This girl had done well. She couldn't be expected to know all the rules. Yet to come on this crossing were things that would be hard for her to bear. This was neither the time nor the place to bring one of them to her attention. He knew she looked down on Thorsen, on himself, on the whole of her crew as her hired hands. He knew she didn't understand what trail-law was, nor how much power a train owner yields to the man who is captain of the wagons. . . .

Three days out from Pawnee Rock, the train rolled out onto the meadows above the river at the Caches on the fork of Mulberry Creek. From here there were two tracks to Santa Fe. One cut sharply south across the Red River desert for eighty miles to water again at Taylor Springs on the Cimarron. This was the shortest route. It was also the way named by the Mexicans the *Jornada del Muerte*, the Journey of Death.

The other fork followed the Arkansas to the Purgatoire, that smaller stream, to the abrupt summit of Raton Pass, and down the other side to the upper Cimarron. Levering intended to take his train

by this longer and easier route. But before camp broke the following morning, events caused him to change his mind.



THE wagons had hardly halted before Simon St. John and a man he called Red Sawyer came boldly among them. Bill looked up from unsnapping the trace chains of a wagon to see the pair standing in front of him, backed by Louisa's white-faced, taut-muscled body.

"Run these men out, Bill!" she stormed. "I ordered them to leave, but they wouldn't until they'd seen you. Even our own drivers wouldn't drive them out until you gave the word! They seem to have forgotten this is my train!"

Levering straightened wearily, turned to the two facing him. "What is it, St. John?" he asked coldly.

St. John grinned. "The little lady's mad." He smirked. "You know what we want—and what we'll get, Levering. Trail courtesy! Sawyer and me are bound the same direction as these wagons. This is hostile country. We ask only the safety of traveling with you."

Bill nodded grudgingly. "All right. But you'll ride ahead of the wagons and on opposite flanks. And you'll keep your fire outside the wagon circle."

St. John and his companion turned away. Louisa Fenwick backed Bill angrily against the wagon-box.

"There isn't anything your kind of man won't do for a little money, is there?" she asked bitterly. "It's plain enough now! The plot can come out since we're three hundred miles away from the Army. You and that St. John and the Charblancs are all in it together! You kill my brother and then fight among yourselves so I'm tricked into hiring you. Then, when you're safe from Colonel Geraghty, you get together again. I know! You'll pull some kind of a hoax like that duel St. John used to kill Emory. Only this time it'll be Indians and you'll take my train! The Charblancs can keep their Santa Fe trade then, can't they? And the rest of you can split the plunder of the train!"

The girl's voice tightened hysterically. She beat savage little fists against Bill's chest. Suddenly and without warning, she

stabbed a hand out, jerking the gun from his belt.

"Maybe you'll tell me again that Fenwicks don't quit! Maybe you'll tell me to be brave! Well, this time it won't work! You're a hard and merciless crew. But a woman can be as hard as any of you if she has to, just once! There's only one way to stop your renegade kind, Bill Levering!"

In a flurry of hate-ridden, bitter speed, she jerked the gun up with both hands. Pinned against the wagon-box by her onslaught, Bill was helpless. Death came close to him. Then a pair of wide hands suddenly seized the girl's arms from behind. Beaver Thorsen's steady, calming voice came over her shoulder.

"Now, miss!" Beaver cautioned. "I reckon Bill has got as little use for them two skunks as you. But Bill is captain of this train and they's a set of rules out here in the grass country that wagon captains has got to go by. One of 'em is that if'n a smaller party asks a bigger party for protection through a strip of hostile country, it's got to be given."

The girl's figure seemed to collapse. Thorsen freed her and she turned blindly toward her own wagon. She seemed convinced, and contrite. But Bill couldn't forget her spirit. And he wondered if his trouble with her was done. . . .

At dawn next morning, just as the camp was waking, a stabbing, woman's scream rang out over the wagons. Louisa!

Levering was the first to reach her, with Beaver close behind him. She stood out beyond the camp-circle, a pot of steaming coffee in her hands. Apparently she had started out with the coffee for the stock guard, who had been on duty all night. And she had found him. But he had no need of her thoughtfulness.

The man lay on his back, staring up into the sky with wide, sightless eyes. A ghastly knife wound had ripped him open from breastbone to navel.

"God!" Beaver Thorsen breathed, and rolled the man over to hide the wound. Bill caught the sobbing, shaken girl by the shoulders, forced her to gulp down some of her own coffee, and sent her back to the wagons.

"Pache!" Beaver said hoarsely. "That's the sign of the Knife, Cuchillo!"

Bill nodded unsteadily. "Looks like somebody else has got the same idea about plundering this train as Charblanc's pirates have."

Beaver shook his head glumly. "Paches ain't smart enough to figure out a fancy campaign. It's blood they want, and to hell with wagons! I tell you, boy, they're in cahoots with Charblanc!"

It was a dire prediction. Bill gave it thought as he moved back to the wagons.

CHAPTER FOUR

Across the Jornada

FOUR of the drivers buried the guard while breakfast cooked. The others, grim and uneasy, gathered by common assent about Louisa Fenwick's wagon to face Bill. It turned into an uncalled train meeting. Simon St. John and Red Sawyer came in to join it, unchallenged.

A hatchet-faced driver stepped a little forward. "I ain't guessing how he done it without a sound, Levering, but that Apache killer Cuchillo has give us warning the mountain trail is blocked. No use fooling ourselves. That guard didn't cut hisself open that way whittling, last night! And if them 'Paches had meant anything but a warning, they'd have kilt more'n one man and run our stock off. What's to do?"

In the few minutes since Louisa had found the dead man, Bill's mind had been racing, putting together what he'd seen and what he'd guessed with what he thought. He shrugged.

"It's pretty plain, men," he said quietly. "If there's two trails to a place and one of them is blocked, there's only one left to take. Fill all your kegs, and water your stock extra good this morning. We'll take the shortcut to the Cimarron and it'll be two days before we have water again at Taylor Springs!"

A mutter ran through the crew. Not entirely dissent, but heavy with speculation. This was a big train and carrying a heavy load of freight to make a dry march reputedly difficult for a single man on horseback. Out of that mutter came one scornful, clarion voice. Simon St. John crowded to the head of the company.

"Two days to cross the *Jornada Del Muerte*!" he shouted. "It'll be closer to

a week! Ever see a man that's gone without water for a week, boys? Know what happens to mules on the third day? They go crazy! You can suit yourselves, but I'm riding back down the trail toward Leavenworth. I'd go across Raton Pass if I had to go. I'd buck Cuchillo and his knife-toting Apaches with my bare fists before I'd ride eighteen freight wagons across the *Jornada!*"

St. John's voice had a strong, clever ring of truth to it. This was a new trail, and few men were certain about what lay ahead. He watched the men in front of him and played on their fears and uncertainty. Finally one of them stepped forward.

"I'll take my time, Levering."

Bill eyed him coldly. "You've got no time coming. You signed to drive to Santa Fe. But we'll be fair with you. And we won't leave you afoot. We're driving some light mules in our herd. Any man that wants to leave can take one of them for his pay. Every man that stays will draw a double measure of gold in the plaza at the end of the trail."

The first man turned away. Three others followed him. Then a fourth. Two more broke at the last minute. In half an hour seven men from the train were riding with St. John and Sawyer down the Arkansas valley toward safer country around Pawnee Rock. Levering moved through the wagons, assigning men to the deserted drivers' seats. The cook drew one, the second horse-guard another, the fire flunky a third. Two stock-drovers were pulled in, the driven stock haltered at the tail-gates of the wagons. Beaver Thorsen volunteered for one of the two remaining seats.

The last wagon was not heavily loaded. And one man in the train had to stay in the saddle, to scout, pick the track, and carry orders along the train. Rather than tie himself to a wagon seat when he should be a hundred places as captain, Levering gave orders to transfer the most valuable of its freight to other wagons and abandon it.

But before his orders could be carried out, Louisa Fenwick came up to him. She had on a wide drover's hat, a tight jacket and heavy leather gloves.

"We started out with eighteen wagons,

Bill Levering," she said purposefully. "We'll drive eighteen wagons into Santa Fe!"



BILL looked at her slight figure and the wall-eyed, double-spanned team in the harness of the wagon in question. His doubt was in his eyes. But a sudden intuition stopped him as his lips formed to voice it. The train belonged to this girl. She was carrying on what her brother had begun. She was trying to take her brother's place. She knew that, had he been here, he would have driven this wagon. She wanted to do it for him. Bill couldn't take away this chance to fight a little for the thing for which her brother had died.

"Leave this wagon be, boys!" he snapped at his crew. "Get the other teams spanned up and let's roll!"

Then he turned to the girl. "I'll hold the lead and mark the trail from the saddle. You'll be Number One wagon. Beaver will trail you, Number Two. The rest will string out in their old order. Keep your team moving steady, but don't drive 'em. They'll lose steam fast, crossing what's ahead of us."

Half an hour after they had pulled out of the valley of the Arkansas, Beaver signaled Bill. He dropped back and climbed from his saddle onto the seat of Beaver's wagon.

"I don't like this, boy," the trapper protested. "If that snake St. John was afraid to cross with us, bad as he seems to want to get to Santa Fe, we're bein' fools to bull ahead across this desert. I'm telling you, Bill, this Cuchillo is a bad hombre, for certain. And there's that gal, ahead, to think about."

"I've thought about her," Bill said. "But there's the train to think about, too. And the trail we're supposed to open. Now, look, Beaver. Did you check that guard over? That wasn't Cuchillo's work. The man's head had been caved in before he was touched with a knife. That was a put-up job, done right from our camp, I'm guessing, and made to look like Apache work."

Thorsen rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Come to think on it, his hair was too

mussed up to make a good scalp, at that! Funny, ain't it. What's up?"

Bill shrugged. "I don't know. Likely there's trouble ahead. But I'm laying my bets it's a renegade crew. I don't think Cuchillo would work out on the *Jornada*. There's nice grass country the other side, and fighting's easier there. Cuchillo's a soldier first and a raider second. He'd stay in green country where he can move fast."

"Same's true of Charblanc and St. John," Beaver protested shrewdly. "Why'd they try to scare us off the mountain track? There's some nice canyons for ambush on the slopes of Raton Pass."

Bill nodded. "But the *Jornada* will take a lot of fight out of us. And on the far side, just a few miles out of Taylor Springs, we've got to go down the bed of a deep coulee for a pair of miles. It's as good a trap as any in the pass."

Thorsen spat elaborately down-wind and pushed his hat back with a wry grin. . . .

Through the length of the first day, the train wound down through the *Jornada* under a powdery blanket of dust. The sun beat against men and animals alike. Bunch-grass died out and vanished. A vast panorama of endless distance widened around the creaking wagons.

Twice Bill fell back to the lead wagon, offering to take the lines for a while to ease the grimy girl who rode its seat. Both times she refused him.

Night came, but the wagons held on until drivers and teams alike were exhausted and weary eyes could no longer see the trail. The meagre supply of water was doled out carefully, most of it going to the mules. Men fell asleep as they hit their blankets, rousing again with the gray light of false dawn. When the sun showed red between the buttes to the eastward, the wagons were rolling again.

Through the long punishment of the second day, Bill watched his train constantly. The drivers were men of leather, and young Fenwick's careful choice of stock paid off in good coin now.

At noon Bill rode for half an hour beside Louisa's wagon. Her face was strained. Her hair, her lashes and her drover's clothing were crusted with dust. Her taut body fought the rocking jolt of the wagon, rather than swaying with it. Weariness

was in every line of her figure. But the grim, determined pride in her eyes held Bill away, kept him from repeating his offer of relief.

Watching the sun and the slowly changing land marks along the horizon, Bill saw that this first big train down the new trail was making good time across the *Jornada*. His pride grew as he watched the trailing line, wagon after wagon, follow the track he set. But his concern grew, also, as the afternoon thinned down and the flat country began to drain into the deep coulee which would bring them out at Taylor Springs.



AT FOUR o'clock, when Louisa started her team down into the winding cut, there had been no sign of danger—nothing but emptiness and the sun. Then, when the last of the wagons was deep into the precipitous, clay-banked gorge, and without warning, the trap was sprung. High on the gaunt rim, a rifle slammed flatly. A strip of canvas ripped up on the tilt of the lead wagon and flapped idly. That first shot was a signal for a hail of death from above.

Wheeling sharply, Levering hammered back to the first wagon, jerked the girl from her seat to the ground.

"Under the wagon!" he bawled. "They can't reach you from above, there. Straddle the coupling bar and keep her rolling!"

Obediently, the girl crawled under the Murphy and sprawled out on the stout oak bar. Bending low, Bill passed the lines in to her.

"Don't worry about the team!" he ordered. "If they killed the mules with wild shooting, they couldn't get the wagons out of here when they were done with us. They'll be careful!"

At the second wagon, Beaver had already seen Louisa's shelter and followed suit. Bill raced on down the line, carrying his order to the others. Reaching the tail of the train, and with a dozen rifles hammering insistently at him from the rim, he reversed and raced back toward Louisa's wagon. Lead sang savagely around him. Once he felt the hot, searing sting of a bullet crease. But he held on, piling from his saddle in a flying, sprawl-

ing leap which carried him under the lead wagon beside the girl.

Teetering precariously, and with both hands wrapped in the lines, Louisa Fenwick was clinging to her narrow perch and grimly fighting her team. As he took the leather ribbons from her grip, Bill saw blood on her lips and teeth and the grimy courses of tears in the thick dust on her cheeks. But he also saw a tight, brave grin, and answered it.

Behind them, from the next wagon, Beaver Thorsen howled invective at the painted, half-naked men who darted from shelter to shelter along the rim.

"You yellow-bellied, red-skinned coyotes! Give me one clean shot."

But it wasn't until the battered train had swept almost the length of the gorge that Beaver had his chance. One of the attackers, seeing the train was about to break free, raced down the lowering wall toward a heap of boulders from which he could smoke out the men riding the coupling poles.

The man's racing figure was exposed less than a couple of seconds, but Beaver's big rifle spat at him and he spun eerily on the lip of the rim. For a moment it looked as if he would fall where he stood. Then he staggered drunkenly, stepped off into space, and hurtled down within a rod of the lead wagons. It had been a cool, fantastically accurate shot. A shout tore up from the drivers. Some of them pulled up their teams and rolled into the open to hammer at the now withdrawing raiders.

Levering crawled from his crouching place and sprinted toward the fallen man. He had just rolled the broken body face up when Beaver reached him. The trapper eyed the perfectly centered hole over the man's heart without pride. His incredulous gaze fastened on the man's face.

"A Mexican!" he muttered thickly. "What the devil, Bill! This doesn't fit!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Enemy Camp

AT SUNDOWN of their first day on the Cimarron Plain, a lone Indian appeared silently among the fires at Taylor Springs. He moved direct-

ly toward the wagon tongue where Levering sat with Beaver Thorsen. He was an uncommonly big Indian, with a large, bowed nose, ugly features and bad teeth. But he moved haughtily, his eyes sharp and his head high. He waved his hand commandingly toward the white tilts of the circled wagons.

"Whose wagons?"

Eying the man carefully, and unwilling to expose Louisa to his beady stare, Bill answered him in his own clipped tones.

"Mine!"

The Indian grinned scornfully. "A white man's answer!" he scoffed. "You lie! What do you carry? Where do you go?"

"Goods—white man's plows, seeds. Guns and powder. In ten days we will be in the town of the Mexicans at Santa Fe."

The Indian took a step forward. "My head believes only what my eyes have seen and my ears have heard," he said grimly. "I see and hear only lies. White man's lies! This is the country of the Fire God's children. It is forbidden to others. Your trail is plain behind you. Follow it back, or you die!"

Bill watched the tall, ugly figure in fascination. He could feel the impact of a dominant leader, a big man poured into an unlovely, red-skinned mould. But not Beaver Thorsen. He could see only an Indian buck in a dirty blanket, talking wide and out of turn to his boss. He piled off the wagon tongue as though the Indian had spat at him.

"Hold your jaw, you lop-eared, gruntin' pig," he growled, "and start liftin' your hocks afore I run you out of camp astraddle my rifle barrel!"

He swung menacingly toward the Indian. Without ever turning his gaze toward Beaver's bulk, the man clipped another phrase at Bill before he turned away.

"I have spoken!" he said, a little ominously.

Beaver started after him as though to hurry his progress through the camp. Bill shot out an arm and caught Beaver's shoulder.

"Easy, hard-shell!" he cautioned softly. "Leave him be!"

Beaver grunted sourly. "Who's he that

he can blow like that and not get a run for it?"

Bill answered him succinctly. "That's Cuchillo. . . ."

Levering puzzled half of the night over the Apache chieftain's visit to the camp. Obviously he had come in warning. Bill rather thought he'd come to measure the kind of men making up the train, too. Remembering that men said Cuchillo was a soldier above anything else, a new course of thought started. It was a fair conclusion, now, that the chief obstacles to the train were St. John and the Charblancs. Their virtual monopoly on Santa Fe furs would be threatened whenever Colonel Geraghty's plan for opening the trail to general trade was complete. It was apparent, after the battle of the *Jornada*, that St. John must have left the Arkansas valley soon after leaving the train, and crossed the desert ahead of it. Somewhere on this side, a crew had been waiting, apparently made up of mixed renegades and Mexican brigands.

Failing in the attack in the gorge, they must have withdrawn farther down the trail to another likely ambush. Still convinced the knife-marked body of the horse guard at the Caches had been only an imitation of Cuchillo's work, Bill knew the grim presence of the Indian among the wagons tonight had been real enough.

Apparently, spurred on by St. John and Charblanc, the Apaches were now ready to join in the annihilation of the train and the closing of the Santa Fe Trail before the great highroad was fairly open. A shrewd man could make good guesses at all of this. But a man couldn't lead a wagon train on guesses. He had to know. Three hours before dawn, Levering rose and rolled Beaver from his blankets.

"I think we've got some other neighbors besides Cuchillo," he said. "I aim to see who they are and just which way they plan to jump. If I'm not back by tracking time, roll the wagons and bend them southwest toward that gap I showed you last night. Mind the girl now, Beaver. Don't forget these wagons belong to her. Don't cross her up."

Beaver growled surlily. "I hired to scout this train," he protested, "not to ride herd on a team of mules and a woman boss!"

Levering laughed at him and swung to saddle.



IT WAS a relief to be free of the wagons for a while. Bill rode swiftly in the moonless dark. Far to the left he saw scattered fires marking Cuchillo's camp, wisely pitched on the flats, safe from surprise. Heading toward the hills on the right, he followed a small, swift creek into their folds and came in an hour to a deep boxed canyon. Other fires burned there, huge, careless blazes. A grin of anticipation creased Levering's face as he dismounted and tied his horse in a thicket.

The renegades felt secure. Apparently they had no picket out. Sliding quietly through the shadows, he came to the edge of the little meadow where the fires burned. Most of the company was knotted together in front of a handful of leaders. Bill recognized Rene Charblanc. Beside him was a smaller man with the same cast of features who must have been his brother. There were also St. John and Sawyer and an Indian whose gaunt frame was unmistakable. In addition, there was a small, white-toothed Mexican in the group. A parley was in progress and the rest of the hard-bitten crew were listening. Cautiously Bill moved up within earshot. Simon St. John was talking to Cuchillo.

"It's all worked out, chief," he was saying. "Those wagons carry plows to turn Apache grass under and wire to fence Apache streams. They'll never head for Santa Fe like they claim. Ask De Mora, here. He'll tell you the Mexicans wouldn't have them. They want your land. But we're your friends. Stick by us and we'll stick by you!"

"You hit 'em, hard as you can. That'll cut 'em down. They'll run for cover, and the only place they can run is toward Santa Fe. There's a company of Mexican soldiers in Glorietta Pass. Their captain is a poor man. De Mora's talked to him. Charblanc and me'll take this crew here down to the pass. For a small share of the plunder off the wagons that get that far, the soldiers'll join us. When the train tries to run the pass to get away from you, we'll wipe out what you've left."

Cuchillo listened intently. When St. John finished, the wily chief shook his head.

"No! The wagon men fight hard. They shoot straight. You lost many men on the desert when you struck them. I believe the wagons will go toward Santa Fe without being driven. I think you would have the Apache do most of your fighting for you. Cuchillo will attack, but not until the wagons are in the pass, and only then if your men and the Mexicans also strike!"

Levering chuckled to himself. Cuchillo understood strategy. He was smart, smart enough to distrust St. John. Suddenly Bill saw that if he could discredit the

grinned confidently. "I don't think so, leather-pants!" he snarled.

At the same instant, movement rustled behind Bill and something smashed down on the back of his head, driving the spring out of his body and dumping him limply forward into St. John's arms.

CHAPTER SIX

War For a Santa Fe Train

THE first face Levering saw when his senses steadied was that of the ugly Cuchillo. The Indian stared at him fixedly, a peculiar, puzzled frown wrinkling his high brow. Rene Charblanc

Another peril-flanked pioneer trail, the old cattle route from Dodge City to Montana, will be the scene of more stirring wilderness adventure in December 10 STORY WESTERN. Reserve your copy in advance—and be sure to read Bill Gulick's exciting action-novel, "The Long Drive North." On sale Nov. 11th.

renegade leaders to the Apaches, he'd rob them of their strongest ally. His chance came sooner than he expected. St. John argued with Cuchillo. Suddenly he threw up his arms in disgust and wheeled on Charblanc.

"You work on the stubborn fool, Rene," he said in rapid, angry English. "I'm fagged out."

Bill saw Cuchillo's face twist in a flicker of expression and he wondered if the Apache had understood the swift words. St. John turned angrily away from the fire, heading obliquely for the creek. Bill was waiting for him when he reached the water. He stabbed his belt gun into the man's back. St. John started violently, but the increased pressure of the gun held him silent.

"Easy, St. John," Bill cautioned. "You just *think* you're through talking to Cuchillo! You and me are going quietly down to his camp and wait for him. When he comes back, you're going to talk, mister! You're going to spill your guts. This game is just about damn well played out."

St. John's color flooded back. He

came between them, pulling his brother after him.

"Luck, Jean," he chuckled. "Until this bucko was out of the game, there was nothing certain to our stopping the train. Now . . ."

Jean Charblanc looked Bill over coolly and shrugged, without interest now that Louisa Fenwick's threat to his monopoly in Santa Fe was virtually removed. Simon St. John shouldered in, broad pleasure on his bearded face. The Mexican brigand, De Mora, was at his elbow.

"Here he is, Louis," St. John exulted. "Colonel Geraghty's buckskin trail-blazer! What'll we do with him?"

De Mora's obsidian eyes brightened pleasurably. "We'll show Cuchillo some tricks even his Apaches don't know," he suggested. "Get a fire going and we'll see how loud this gringo can yell. Cuchillo will like that."

The Apache moved forward. He stared at Bill in puzzlement. Finally he shook his head.

"No!" he said flatly. "Cuchillo makes his own amusement. Keep this man for me. When I want him, I'll come for him."

St. John looked at the Charblancs. Jean shook his head.

"We ain't Indians," he said. "It's the wagons we want, not somebody to burn! Tie him up and keep him for the Apache. Then we'll hit saddle. We've got to be in the pass when the wagons get there. . . ."

Cuchillo rode out. Levering was securely bound. The renegades broke camp and filed toward the plain. Helpless in the saddle of a led horse, Bill had his regrets. But there was one hope, still, for the wagons and the Trail. Hard-headed and stubborn though he was, Beaver Thorsen was the saltiest fighting-man in the Southwest.

Meagre as this consolation was, it fled swiftly. As the renegade company debouched from the hills into the grass country, its vanguard caught a man in the middle of fording the stream they followed. Caught cold and unexpectedly, the man shoved his hands up and grudgingly waited for them to take him. It was Thorsen.

"Luck'll only shave so thin, won't it, Bill?" he said. "That gal plumb drove me out to look for you. She run me right out'n the train and took it over herself. Remember, you told me to stick by what she said."

Bill scowled. Louisa had ordered Beaver out after him. Beaver had gone, eager and hopeful. Both of them had been foolish. Both had forgotten the ultimate safety of the train and Colonel Geraghty's trail to Santa Fe. But they had been loyal.

They rode in silence. For four days they moved southward. Their captors were callous, feeding them but allowing them no freedom of movement. They came at last to a final camp at the foot of Glorietta Pass. High humor was strong among the renegades. Tomorrow they would be joined by the bribed Mexican garrison from above. Tomorrow Cuchillo would follow the train in off the plains. Tomorrow they would divide a rich train of plunder. Somebody broke out a keg of Taos Lightning.

Toward morning Bill roused from a sleep made restless by troubled thoughts of a fighting girl and her safety, to find a rough hand clamped over his mouth for silence. Swift hands were working at

his bonds. He could smell the Apache before he could clearly see his ugly face. Behind him, Beaver Thorsen was methodically chafing the cramps from his freed arms and legs.

The two captives freed, Cuchillo treaded a way out of the heavily sleeping renegade camp and moved out onto a promontory overlooking the great valley. Here he stopped.

"Cuchillo knows, now, who speaks the truth! You tell Cuchillo a thing, then act as a good soldier does to bring that thing about. You have trouble. But you are a good and honest chief among your own people, for one of your men comes to rescue you, even though it means leaving your precious wagons in the hands of a woman! You tell the truth!"

Eagerly, hardly believing, Bill followed the swift words in the Apache tongue.

"These others are dogs! They say you want Apache lands when it is plain you wish only to buy furs from the Navajo country across the mountains. They claim they want only to save the Apache from your black plans. What they really want is for Cuchillo to plunder your wagons for them. Cuchillo is not a fool. There is wisdom in the Apache blood. And there is honor.

"There is this moment a great fear in the heart of the wagon-man's woman. She drives night and day. Already she is in the valley below. Tomorrow she will be in the pass. The Mexican soldiers have sighted her from the summit. They hurry down to warn the sleeping ones in the camp behind us. They have made much talk of war. They shall have it. Go to your wagons and your woman, white man. Make ready. When they strike, the warriors of the Knife will be at their back."

◆ ◆ ◆

IT TOOK a pair of hours to reach the desperately hurrying wagons. Once among them, time was so short Bill had but a word with Louisa. But from it he tasted the strain she had been under and the vast, honest relief which filled her at his return. After that brief word, she turned to work beside him as swiftly as he himself. The moment the wagons were circled she set a crew of men to tumbling

out boxes and crates for a barricade.

They were nearly ready when the rising sun brought the renegades and the bribed Mexican *soldados* of the pass garrison in a slashing attack. It was a bold frontal charge. Cuchillo, expecting a more cautious approach, was caught a little off-guard and was thereby delayed for a time. When the splendid avalanche of his red warriors broke from the timber, behind the renegades, as he had promised, the forefront of the attack had breached Louisa's barriers at the wagons.

For a dozen minutes the center of the hasty circle was a mad maze of fighting men. Caught across the circle from Beaver and Louisa, Bill fought grimly toward them. His guns soon emptied, and with no breather in which to reload them, he reversed his rifle and swung it.

Louis De Mora leaped out of the tangle at him, pistol at full cock. The rifle struck the brigand's neck and drove him down, but his weapon fired as he fell and put a ball in Levering's leg. While Bill was yet down on his knees, the Charblanc brothers charged out of the maelstrom and drove savagely at him. Parrying desperately, he turned Jean Charblanc's knife and bent the man mercilessly over his own steel. Howling madly as his brother fell limp, the huge Rene slammed downward at Bill's head with his rifle butt. Off-balance, Bill tried to evade the blow. Across the circle, a rifle snapped. The giant trader turned slowly and fastened glazing eyes on the smoke trailing from the muzzle of a weapon in Beaver Thorsen's big hands. Then he fell slowly.

An eddy in the battle hid Louisa and Beaver for a moment. When he could see them again, Beaver was down and the girl was being dragged between two of the wagons by Sawyer and Simon St. John. Raging savagely, Bill tunneled his way on through the press, scorning men who struck at him to reach the far edge of the circle. But when he came into the open against the wagons, Louisa was gone.

Beaver was sitting up, stupidly rubbing a great blue bruise at the roots of his hair. Bill bent demanding above him. Then he saw Louisa. She was crouched between two wagons, her wide, terrorized eyes fastened on a curved, bloody knife

in the hands of a gaunt Indian standing beside her. Back of them, Bill could see the horribly ripped bodies of Sawyer and Simon St. John. Cuchillo wiped the knife on his breeches and stepped forward.

"The fight is done, my friend," he said. "The knife gives the white man his wagons!"

Bill reached Louisa, took her arm.

"More than that, you've given me, Cuchillo," he said gratefully. "You've helped open a highroad. You've helped make a country. And I have my woman, safe! The road over the pass is short. There'll be peace along its track. Come to Santa Fe one day."

Cuchillo's ugly face widened in a grin, "I will come, brother," he said. "I have a troublesome woman in my lodge. When she hears my friends are traders, I will neither eat nor sleep until we have crossed the pass and seen your stores."

The Indian dropped Bill's hand and turned back to his own men, bawling orders for them to drive the last remnants of the renegade force clear of the wagons. Louisa pulled Bill around.

"But, Bill," she protested mischievously, "I had planned to sell the train in Santa Fe and go back to Kansas! I know nothing about trading in this country!"

Bill grinned widely. "Neither do I, lady," he agreed. "But if we've fought this hard to get here, I reckon we can stay and learn—together."

Beaver Thorsen grunted dismally and fixed an accusing eye on the girl.

"Ma'am, you've cheated me sharp," he complained. "I come this far with Bill so's him and me could trap up the Rio Grande Del Norte when this trek was done. Now look at him! Hell-roarin' to partner a gal and leave me out on a limb."

Louisa laughed happily and freed an arm to link through that of the old trapper. "Without a partner, Beaver?" she asked gently. "Why, you've got two of them! We're tenderfeet at trading, Bill and me. We've got to have a fur man."

Beaver Thorsen breathed heavily and his long face brightened.

"What we layin' here in palaver for?" he barked testily. "Santa Fe's a mite away and we got work to do, with the top of the season right on us, now!"

THE END

What did a man need
with a new gun when
there were only jack-
rabbits or occasional
coyotes to shoot at?



WEST-TO FREEDOM!

Gone were the wild, carefree buckskin days, gone the danger and zest of adventure, in this land Zeke Simmons had tamed. Yet their siren memory lived, and would never die.

By Cliff Farrell

A LISTLESS tug straightened the baited line, followed by a sluggish half-minute of clumsy worrying. Zeke Simmons knew it was only another bullhead fumbling around down on bot-

tom until it made sure the hook was hung solidly in the back of its fool jaw.

That was the way with bullheads. They seemed to insist on being caught, and they were a plague to take off the hook. Now a bass. . . .

Zeke's puckered gray eyes became remotely wistful. It had been more than a year, he reflected, since he had experienced the electric thrill of a bass strike. He could still recall the tingle of it. But that was only a memory now. A man wasted his time casting a surface lure nowadays.

The settlers had seined out the bass the previous summer and sold them at a few cents a pound in town. Any survivors had left for parts unknown. Men and sheep and hogs and cattle had thinned out the best of the willow cover along the stream. The hickory and walnut and ash was pretty well stripped off the watershed, too. The stream did not carry the volume it used to.

Zeke decided the bullhead was hung, and pulled it out. After some cussing he freed the hook and added the catch to his string.

Somehow its vacuous, wide-mouthed resignation aroused in him a feeling of kinship. He quenched that trend of thought in a hurry. It smacked of disloyalty to Lucinda.

He peered at the sun. It was low in the west. With a twinge of dismay he realized he had spent more time fishing than he had reckoned. Hastily he cleaned and skinned the catch and headed for the house.

Zeke was hoping his mother-in-law hadn't got back from her gossiping visit to the Hurleys. In spite of that apprehension he ceaselessly scanned the brush and the earth at his feet as he moved along.

It was habitual with Zeke that he saw every movement of bird or crawling thing around. His mind catalogued each tiny talon mark or rodent's sign along the way.

He broke stride once, a sudden high glint of hope in his rawboned face, and turned aside to peer closely at a sandy hummock. But his interest faded. The lift dropped out of his shoulders, leaving them slack again. It was only the trail of a sheep. It had been a long time since he had seen the heart-shaped spoor of a deer.

The lowing of a milk cow drifted from the Jessup place. He could hear Matt Siler's yap hound in screaming pursuit of a jackrabbit up on the bluff. The chimney smoke of three farmhouses showed above the timber down the flat. More of them were squatted beyond the shoulder of the bluff.

It all made Zeke, who was twenty-eight, feel very venerable and a trifle bewildered. He recalled having dropped an antelope just about this time of day right where his patch of green corn now stood.

And sometimes there had been more dangerous quarry around. Zeke looked toward a pignut hickory which stood below the toe of the bluff. A young Cheyenne warrior lay buried there. Zeke had marked the grave with a walnut log. He still had the warrior's lance and bow around the house somewhere.

The Cheyennes no longer ventured within a hundred miles of this region. Folks were even talking of building a branch railroad in from Council Bluffs.

Zeke scouted the house from the cover of the corn, and his heart sank. His mother-in-law's rickety buggy stood in the yard. Mom Gidney had pulled the rocking chair into the open door, where she could keep an eye out for Zeke's appearance, as well as offer advice and criticism to Lucinda, who was busy cooking supper.

Mom wore her calico visiting dress and had her starched sunbonnet moored hard down under her forceful jaw, which meant she was in a lecturing frame of mind.

She was waiting for him. Zeke considered the possibility of hiding the fish and the line out in the corn and walking boldly in as though he hadn't a shadow of guilt on his soul. But he knew it was hopeless. Mom, with her eye for detail, wouldn't have overlooked the absence of the fishing line from its usual peg.

Zeke was in for it. But at least he had Lucinda to temper the storm. He took a grip on himself and advanced upon the house.



LUCINDA sighted him from the window the instant he appeared. She tucked a strand of glossy chestnut hair in place. There was a soft flash of

pleasure in her dark eyes. Zeke never got over marveling at the way she became instantly aware of him whenever he came in sight. Like a flower turning its face always to the sun.

Lucinda stood on tiptoe and kissed him. "How many, Zeke?"

"Five," Zeke said, handing over the catch. "Howdy, mother!"

Mom's lips were pursed. "You was cultivatin' corn when I left at noon," she observed scathingly.

Lucinda came quickly to his defense. "Zeke broke a shovel, mother. He's going to the settlement in the morning to get a new one."

"He's always breaking shovels," Mom said acidly. "He could have found something else to do. There's that upper field to be got in shape. He could have borrowed Fred Hurley's ox span and breaking plow. Fred ain't using them right now."

"A man can't have his nose to the grindstone every live-long minute," Lucinda argued.

"Winter's comin' some day," Mom said darkly, using her famine-and-pestilence tone.

Zeke didn't have the knack of disputing with Mom. She was a solid, assertive person who filled the rocking chair to overflowing.

"I'll fly at it tomorrow," he promised sincerely.

He privately considered Mom a trifle unreasonable. He had built Lucinda as nice a cabin as a man could find in a long day's ride. Built of adz-squared logs, snugly chinked, it had a rock fireplace and a shake-roof. The majority of the settlers still lived in dugouts or soddies.

Lucinda kept the house as spic-neat as she kept herself. She had coal oil lamps to light her needle work of an evening. Even the Hurleys still used lard dips, which smoked like fury. The brass-bowled parlor lamp, with its hand-painted shade, had been a seven-days wonder for miles around. Lucinda owned the only set of china dishes on the creek and had a horse-hair sofa in the parlor.

All this in the four years since he and Lucinda had made a match of it, thanks to a virgin soil where wheat ran forty bushels to the acre.

Mom, having had her say, climbed into the buggy, stating it was high time she was getting the oven on for Lucinda's pa. Lucinda's parents were next neighbors on the creek.

She called Zeke aside before pulling out. "Me and 'Cindy are ridin' to town with you in the mornin', Zeke," she stated. "They're demonstratin' one of these new sewing machines at Smiley's store. I want 'Cindy to look at it."

Zeke winced. "Sewin' machine?"

Mom's jaw jutted. "A person would think I was speakin' of Satan. If it was a new saddle or some new-fangled fishin' dew-dad you'd have perked your ears plenty. It's high time 'Cindy had something nice. What with washin' and scrubbin' and cookin', from sun-up to dark, she's got enough to do without wearin' her fingers down to the bone makin' your clothes by hand. She needs a sewing machine."

Zeke was quelled. Mom clucked at the horse and cast a superior glance around. "There ain't another stitchin' machine in the country," she added. "I'd just like to see Ida Hurley's face when she hears my 'Cindy has got one."

Zeke watched the buggy rattle away. He knew that sewing machine was as good as bought. He thought of the rifle he had seen in Smiley's store on his last trip to the settlement. It was one of those new Winchester .44-40's. It had a dark walnut stock and an ivory front sight. Zeke's old muzzle-loading Sharps was showing wear and tear. And that .44-40 was a mighty pretty gun.

Shucks, he reflected, it would have been only a waste of money, anyway. What did a man need with a new gun when there were only jackrabbits or occasional coyotes to shoot at? You had to travel west a week's ride to get a chance at anything worth burning powder on. And the farm work didn't allow any time for such rambling.

There was the corn and wheat coming along, and that upper field to be broken, and more bottom land to be cleared before fall. Still—it had been a right nice rifle to think about.

The bullheads tasted mighty good the way Lucinda fried them. Rolled in cornmeal and brought to a crisp outer brown

over slow embers, along with corn pone and sorghum lick and a side of dumpling stew from the leftover pot, they were enough to satisfy any man.

"An' you used to fix up thin venison steaks to a king's taste, too," Zeke told her reminiscently.



STILL, there was an empty futility deep within him. He thought of the steady routine of chores stretching endlessly ahead. Zeke was still a little at a loss to explain just how he had become a farmer. He had a hard time keeping his mind on it. His thoughts and attention were always wandering off to the horizons or to the rush of the wind in the timber, when he should be seeing to it that he held the plow to a straight furrow.

Zeke hadn't meant to linger in this neck of the prairie when he first came in. The country teemed with game in those days and he had been acting as civilian scout and hunter for the Army. He had seen the timber along the stream black with wild turkey after sundown, and in daytime bands of antelope flashing their white flags on the open prairie. The chance of meeting an occasional Cheyenne had only added a touch of spice to existence. Zeke had lived fat and high off the land.

Then Mom and Hank Gidney had wagoned in with an Illinois party when the big rush west of the Missouri border began. They brought Lucinda with them. One thing led to another and Zeke had found himself married.

It had been fun building the cabin and watching Lucinda's vibrant pride of possession. But things had kept on accumulating. Zeke felt a little bewildered when he looked back at it. China dishes and a parlor set and a hand-painted lamp. Cows to milk and worry over. Pork meat hanging in the smokehouse instead of venison jerky. Chickens in the barnyard. Settlers on every hand and a dusty wagon road passing the door. A mercantile and a

flourishing settlement only five miles away.

Zeke had a feeling of suffocation. Each little possession was like another weight chaining him down. Now this sewing machine. . . There was a finality, an aura of unalterable domesticity, about such a contraption.

Zeke phlegmatically took care of the sundown barn chores. The lye crock beneath the ash hopper was about full, and so was the grease box of kitchen scraps. Lucinda was saving for soft soap. She'd be making a batch of soap soon. There was the milking and feeding to be done before they set out for town in the morning. Zeke knew he'd have to roust out early to get a start at it.

He hurrahd Lucinda around as usual when he came in at lamplight, warning her she was getting too fat and sassy for her own good, and giving her a playful spank whenever she passed within reach.

Lucinda giggled and pouted and flirted with him, according to the rules of the game, as she readied up the house and put in a few licks at the loom. But whenever Zeke wasn't noticing her eyes became quiet. Her piquant mouth lost its elfin abandon, and she was a grave, mature woman—a wife studying her man, aware that something precious and irreplaceable was slipping from her grasp.

She watched him stand at the door, looking out into the starlight. She had an all-gone sensation. A fierce jealousy tore at her. He seemed to be listening to distant siren voices whose rivalry she could not combat.

"Zeke—" she spoke out suddenly. But her resolution failed and she finished it lamely: "It's a pretty night, isn't it?"

She knew it sounded inane. She had started out to confide in him an overwhelming secret she had just learned. She had been praying for this miracle for four years, and now her prayers had been answered.

But how, she wondered desperately,

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could she ever tell Zeke he was to become a father when he stood there listening to the night with that haunting gypsy longing in his lean face?

Oh, she knew he would play his part to perfection if she told him. He'd make a fuss over her, do a war dance around the room. He'd throw out his chest and walk on the clouds. That was the way all expectant fathers were supposed to act when they first heard the news. Zeke would make sure not to disappoint her. He had never willfully disappointed her in anything. He loved her.

But afterwards! She could picture it. Afterwards the weight of this new responsibility would settle on him. It would keep him at grips with the plough, or swinging the ax, a little longer each day. His glance would not lift to the distant horizons so often.

She was remembering him as he had been the first time she saw him in his buckskin breeches and the old blue army shirt—a restless wildling of unpredictable impulses, capable of boundless outbursts of energy, and long periods of carefree inertia.

She saw him now in the homespuns she had made, with the stolidity of the plow beginning to show in his lank shoulders and in his stride, the inflexibility of the land working its alchemy upon him.

Lucinda lay motionless and awake for hours beside Zeke that night in their bed, staring up—at nothing.



LUCINDA stood in Pop Smiley's store, looking at the sewing machine, and she was thinking it was almost sinful to be so covetous. She could hardly keep her hands off it. She barely heard the grandiloquent droning of the salesman, his jargon of bobbins and treadles and shuttles and feeders. He was from Kansas City, and he wore a celluloid collar and had soft, plump hands.

Mom Gidney first tried out the contraption. Mom was a trifle handicapped by her bonnet and her corset, and flustered by the interest of the circle of onlookers. Nevertheless, she gave the machine a treading that would have developed any flaw in most anything not up to standard.

Mom pronounced it practical. She wondered what mechanical marvel they'd be thinking of next.

Lucinda's throat was tight when she took her place at the machine after some coaxing. Her fingers shook as she guided a strip of cloth beneath the flashing needle and watched the stitch grow with magic speed.

"But it costs so much," she argued lamely.

"My lands!" Mom snorted. "Zeke sold them two heifers last week, didn't he? An' he's got another nice crop of wheat coming along. You can well afford it." Mom gave Zeke a look.

"You're durned tootin' we can afford it," he hastened to say.

The bystanders were properly impressed.

"I'll think it over," Lucinda hedged.

"Stuff an' nonsense!" said Mom. "Don't let her crawfish out of it, Zeke. She wants it, clean down to her toes, but she's the kind that never makes up her mind without proddin'."

"Put the blamed thing in the wagon," Zeke said grandly to the salesman. "We'll just take it along home with us. How much did you allow your bottom price was?"

Lucinda was so happy she felt like crying. She did cry a little. Mom called her a fool.

But Mom wore her cat-and-mouse look. Jennie Sealover was among the onlookers, and that was assurance enough that the news would be spread with speed and elaboration. Ida Hurley would hear about it before the day was many more hours older.

Lucinda dabbed at her eyes and turned to Zeke. Her lips were soft and endearing and grateful.

But Zeke's glance had strayed, against his will. A showcase stood across the room, displaying shotguns and rifles and pistols and an assortment of hunting knives, cleaning kits, cartridges and shells.

Zeke was trying his best not to look at the .44-40. But he was looking at it. Lucinda's animation drained away, leaving an inner desolation. Zeke had never seemed as far away from her as he was in that instant.

"You still considerin' that .44 long gun,

Zeke?" Pop Smiley asked laughingly.

Zeke forced a deprecatory smile. "Shucks, Pop, what would I want with a gun like that?"

Zeke's homely smile was fixed and cheerful when he turned to her, fixed on his square mouth as though he had riveted it there and aimed to keep it in place. He chuckled her under the chin, told her to finish her store list, so they could hit the trail for home. There was, Zeke allowed, work to be done at the place before dark.

Zeke and the salesman loaded the sewing machine onto the wagon while Lucinda and Mom finished the buying.

And when they came out of the mercantile there was old Kemas Shotwell, sitting hipped over in the saddle of his hammer-headed Indian pony, talking to Zeke.

Kemas Shotwell still insisted on wearing buckskins and preferred moccasins to cowhide boots. He was said to be past seventy. He had gone down the Santa Fe trail many times in the old days. He carried a bullet somewhere in his hide as a relic of the war with Mexico.

Kemas and Zeke had been hunting partners before Zeke met Lucinda. Kemas used to look Zeke up whenever his wanderings brought him back to the settlements. Mom's disapproval of his aimless ways had finally discouraged him from such visits.

The old frontiersman had a loaded pack mule with him. His Sharps rifle was slung on the saddle.

He was shaking hands with Zeke. "Gettin' too lonesome in these parts, Zeke," he was explaining, "but in that country there's deer as thick as they used to be around here. Bear, too, an' elk. Even moose. You never saw a moose, did you?"

Kemas saw Mom looming up then. He slapped the pack mule with a rope, kicked his pony into action and jogged hurriedly away.

"He's headin' west," Zeke said absently. "To the Montana country. Maybe even as far as Oregon."

"Good riddance," Mom sniffed. "My lands! Why would a body want to go traipsin' off to Montana? He'll likely lose his fool scalp. The Sioux are still up to mischief out West, so I hear."

Lucinda watched Zeke's gaze follow

Kemas Shotwell until distance had swallowed him and his pack mule. In Zeke's face was that yearning with which he so often listened to the voices of the night.

Lucinda said nothing. When Zeke set up the sewing machine in the front room she played her part just as he had so often played his. She admired the machine from every angle, and kissed and squeezed Zeke, telling him how happy she was. She shed her town dress, and got into her gingham and made the treadle fly as she ran a few hems just for the thrill of it.

Zeke lifted her and swung her heels high. He spanked her, told her she thought more of that go-devil than she did of him. He played his part, too. He was happy in the giving.

But afterwards, when Zeke left to take care of the chores, Lucinda turned away from the sewing machine as she would from a serpent.

Mom gaped. "What's wrong?" she demanded sharply.

"I'm losing Zeke," Lucinda said.

"Losin' Zeke? You ain't tryin' to say that you an' him—"

Lucinda's voice was toneless. "No. Zeke would never leave me. Not that way. He loves me. But I'm losing him—a little at a time."



LUCINDA stood with her hands idle in the dishwater, watching Zeke in the distance. Bare to the waist, he was slaving at the breaking plow behind the stolid span of oxen he had borrowed from Fred Hurley. It was muscle-cracking work, where progress through the root-laced earth could be measured only in stubborn inches at a time.

The house chores were piling up ahead of her, but she had spent most of the morning watching Zeke. There was no life in her eyes.

She now saw Zeke's head lift. The oxen stopped. Zeke was peering toward a clump of burr oak off to his right. His lank figure straightened, then he crouched a little. Even though he had not moved from his tracks, the apathy had vanished from him in a swift instant. Now he showed an uncanny alertness and a cat-like litheness as he continued to stare.

Lucinda's heart gave a mighty surge. A sudden rush of memory misted her eyes, carrying her back to the day she had first seen Zeke. Never before had she realized the change in him.

Shadows moved in the brush. The sun caught the glint of bronze feathers. Half a dozen turkeys appeared in the open and advanced upon the fresh-turned earth Zeke had plowed. Ignoring Zeke, they began scrabbling for worms.

Lucinda saw the zest fade from Zeke's posture. Slowly he turned back to the plow, stirred the placid oxen into action. He bent his shoulders to the task again.

Turkeys. *Tame* turkeys. Harley Jessup was raising them. Tame turkeys where Zeke had stalked the wild ones by the score in the past.

"He will never forget," Lucinda murmured. "He'll always be listening—and waiting—and hoping."

She stood there a long time watching Zeke, with a tenderness in her eyes greater than even he had ever seen.

She turned and looked at her house—her house, with its neatness and its hominess. The rag rugs, and the calico curtains, the china dishes, the polished cooking ware.

She was touched by a faint regret, but she was smiling, too.

"It won't matter," she reflected. "Nothing matters that much."

Lucinda made her plans. She waited three days before the opportunity came. Zeke and her father had gone down the creek to help a new settler with his house raising. Mom was attending the sodality meeting at Jennie Sealover's.

Lucinda was alone. She changed to her town dress and bonnet. She hooked the mare to the light wagon and loaded the sewing machine aboard, covering it with a robe.

She placed beneath the seat the coal oil jug, which needed replenishing, and drove down the road to the settlement. She was breathing with a tight little effort. In her cheeks lay a taut pallor.

It was late afternoon when Zeke and his father-in-law sighted the heavy plume of smoke rising above the shoulder of the bluff upstream. They dropped their tools and mounted the team bareback, leaving the wagon behind. They covered the five

miles back to the place at breakneck speed.

Zeke pulled a long, heart-felt sigh of thanksgiving into his lungs as he came in sight of the house and saw Lucinda standing in the yard unharmed.

The house was a roaring pyre. The roof was caving in, sending spars billowing high. There was no hope of saving anything.

But Zeke hardly gave the fire a second glance. He hit the ground in a running dismount. Then Lucinda was in his arms, burying her face against him.

Mom, her bonnet askew, arrived from the sodality meeting, standing up in the buggy, using the whip. Mom began to wring her hands.

Zeke lifted Lucinda's chin, forced her to turn her tear-drenched face up to him. "Shucks," he said, "what's a house? Don't cry, sweet. I'll build 'you another one, bigger an' purtier than that shack. It'll have a porch all around to the front, and a bay window. I'll set it right where that one stood."

"But I don't want another house here," Lucinda wailed. "I'm tired of this place, Zeke. I want to—to go West. To Montana. Maybe even as far as Oregon."

"Montana?" Zeke mumbled. "Oregon?"

Zeke began noticing things then. Standing in orderly array in the yard, well out of reach of the heat from the burning house, were Lucinda's trunk and his old canvas pack sacks, along with a few cooking utensils. The old bake oven was there, and the iron skillet. And the loom he had made for her. He noticed his hunting knife and the worn whetstone and his fishing kit. Also a goodly salvage of staples from the pantry.

Laid out across his warsack was a clean but worn army shirt and a pair of brush-scarred buckskin breeches and moccasins. Zeke hadn't known that his old scouting regalia was still around. He had taken it for granted that Lucinda, on Mom's insistence, had burned that outfit long ago. Mom had denounced such apparel as heathenish.

"We've got enough to get along on," Lucinda was saying, the words coming in a rush. "You can sell the farm, Zeke. Not that we need money. There are deer and elk and bear in Montana, they say. And moose. And plenty of free land."

She felt something surge and soar deep in his chest, saw the way his mouth lost its taciturnity. It was like opening a cage and watching an eagle spread its wings.



LUCINDA pressed into his hand an object she had kept hidden behind her. It was the gleaming new .44-40, with the walnut stock and the ivory front sight.

"I—I decided I didn't want the sewing machine, Zeke." She was blushing furiously now. "So I took it back to Smiley's today and—and traded it for the gun. You'll be needing a good rifle in Montana."

Zeke looked again at the collection of salvaged belongings. It had taken time and thought to select that practical assortment from the accumulation in the house. There was nothing that wouldn't come in handy on a long wagon trip. It was just about what he and Lucinda had owned when they first set up housekeeping.

The empty oil jug lay heat-cracked near the burning house, which was now crumbling into a seething ruin. Zeke detected the faint tang of coal oil. He guessed that Lucinda must have splashed some of it on her dress when she was drenching the interior of the house before applying the brand.

Zeke looked down into her eyes. He saw the price, and the confession, there—and the undismayed happiness.

He picked her up with a wild whoop of joy, swung her heels higher than his head. He kissed her until she was limp in his arms, and laughing and pouting and leading him on.

"We're headin' West," he told her.

Lucinda echoed it. "We're heading West, Zeke."

The secret that she held could wait. There was plenty of time for that. She would tell him somewhere on the trail.

She didn't know exactly where Montana was, or how far away. She didn't care. She had Zeke again. All of him. Forever now.



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Adventure
15c

DOCTOR OWLHOOTER

By Fred Gipson



"We're out after a hold-up gent and it looks like we've got him cornered. Lift 'em, feller."



Branch Gurd gave a frog-sticker knife to a ragamuffin button, then set out to find a job, backed by what he thought was a stolen fortune in folding money.

BRANCH GURD claims he takes a whirl at the hold-up game one time, but the business don't pan out to suit him and he reforms. This is down in Texas. The place is called Blanco. It's a water hole up in the hills and brush, north of Santone.

Branch is riding north. He's heading for Voca, up on the San Saba. He's heard there's a riding job open up there for a top cowhand, which same Branch claims to be.

Branch is sure anxious for this job. He's been out of work for six months and jobs is scarce as feathers on the dun hoss he's riding. He's flat broke and he ain't fed

often enough in the last few days to hurt his digestion none. He rides into Blanco about nightfall, and Old Man Hunger's riding with him.

The citizens of this hill town don't run out with open arms to greet strangers. Branch is younger in them days and his pride won't let him ask for a hand-out. But he's got to eat. So he glances over his gear to see what he can spare.

He'll need his saddle and rope to hold down that job, if he gets the job. He'll need his hoss to carry him to it. But the dun will travel without spurs and Branch don't plan to shoot nobody soon, so he pawns his spurs and shooting iron with a

snake-eyed wagon-yard man for five dollars and a night's keep for his mount. He knows he's been cheated, but what can he do?

He's done spotted a restaurant down the street. He heads in that direction, his mouth watering over the thoughts of a steak the size of a blacksmith's apron and cooked just enough to take the paw and beller out of it. But he has to pass a saloon on the way and he gets side-tracked.

This is a mistake. The barkeep sets him out a drink calculated to make a rabbit r'ar up and spit in a rattlesnake's eye. It's a mixture of alkali water, alcohol, tobacco juice and a dash of strychnine—the last thrown in to keep the heart going.

One drink of this on an empty stomach puts starch in Branch's backbone and a shine in his eyes. He looks at his five dollars and now they look like five hundred. He sees a couple of citizens setting at a poker game behind him and invites them to set a foot on the rail. They join him without arguing and ante up with a drink or two in return.

Whiskey being the juice of beautiful sentiment, it ain't long till Branch and his new chums is thicker'n three in a bed. Branch has got three dollars left now, and when these friendly citizens invite him to buy chips in their little poker game, Branch don't give his steak a second thought. Branch has a heap of confidence in his ability with the cards and is convinced he'll quit this game the winner.

He finds out later these two birds do a heap to discourage gambling in Blanco by making it difficult, if not impossible, for a man to leave any game they set in with cash in his pockets. Howsoever, they let Branch win the first two pots, like good card slicks are accustomed. They're just baiting him. This looks like chicken feed to Branch, the way he's feeling now. He invests his winnings in a full bottle and takes to the game in earnest.

The bottle wins. Or somebody knocks him in the head. Branch can't tell which when he wakes up next morning laying in a pile of tin cans and busted glass behind the saloon. He don't know how he finds this bed in the dark and his two friends of the night before ain't hanging around to explain. His hat's gone and so's his

money. All he's got left is a headache and a taste in his mouth like he's et supper with the coyotes.



BRANCH picks himself up out of the dump pile and heads up the alley in the direction he thinks the wagon yard is in. But the ground is still rocky underfoot, and the next thing he knows he's wound up behind the town bank. He sure feels lonesome and full of remorse.

He's a little confused on directions here and hangs his elbows over a board fence to steady himself while he gets his bearings. He's still getting them when he hears a couple of gents talking inside the bank.

One is saying: "I know it's a little risky to send out four thousand dollars on hoss-back, but it's got to go. If I don't get the payroll to that construction crew by night, half the outfit will quit the job. And you can't build a railroad without hands."

"I ought to fire that clerk for missing the stage with that money," growls another voice. "But nobody knows we're sending it. I'll put it in this satchel and have a man ready to travel within an hour."

This is all water under the bridge to Branch. He's got his directions now and he rounds the corner of the bank building in time to bump into a hard-eyed gent with a steeple-crowned hat pulled low over his forehead.

This gent appears startled at first, then resentful. "What in the hell do you mean, cowhand," he wants to know.

"I reckon," Branch tells him, "I mean the same thing you mean, pal—to turn a corner!"

The hard-eyed gent retreats a step at that and shoves back a coat to reveal his cutter. "Don't get smart with me, cow-boy," he warns. "I don't take sass from nobody!"

Under the circumstances, Branch could get a heap of pleasure and satisfaction out of mixing it with this proddy gent. If he could come to grips with something, it might steady his nerves. But dehorned like he is, all he can do is tuck his tail. He knows this gent's gun ain't a watch charm and he's got to back down.

"Pick up the marbles, friend," he in-

vites. "You've got the bulge and I'm wrong. The road's yourn. I'm sorry I'm even alive!"

And he sidesteps the gent and is gone before the other bird has time to crowd the play further.

But attempts to take backwater like this don't cheer Branch none. It galls him to be kicked around. And he figures he's been kicked around a plenty since last night. That wagon-yard man cheated him to begin with. Them two card slicks take his last dollar. And now he has to back down from a ringy sidewinder that by rights was due to have his teeth kicked in. It looks like the world's down on Branch, for sure. He's mighty bitter, all of a sudden.

Maybe it's this feeling that gets Branch to thinking about what he's overheard behind the bank. Or maybe it's the sight of a ragged little old tow-headed kid standing outside a show winder.

There's a bunch of pocket knives in that winder and the kid is eying them wistful. He turns and catches Branch's eyes on him and hands Branch a hopeless, twisted grin.

"Ain't them some purty frog-sticker's, mister?" he says.

"They are, for a fact, son," agrees Branch. "Aiming to buy one?"

The light goes out of the kid's eyes and he tucks his chin. "No, sir," he says. "Pa promised me one. But then the bank takened all our stock, and Pa ain't got no more money."

Branch don't hesitate a second. He reaches in his pocket and pulls out a horn-handled knife with a steer's head carved on. "You take this'n, button," he says. "It's a better knife than anything in that winder. It'll shave the hair on your arm."

The kid's eyes nearly pop out of his head. "You mean I can keep it, mister?" he wants to know.

"You keep it," says Branch. "That's for luck, kid. And I'm fixing to need all the luck!"

Like I say, maybe it's this kid that does it. Anyhow, while Branch is talking to the kid he's thinking about all the injustices in this world of sin and sorrow. Here's a lonesome little old kid asking nothing out of life but a frog-sticker. But does he get it? No. A big rich bank comes

along and steals it from him. Here's him, Branch Gurd, wanting nothing but a job and a place to eat. But does he get it? No. He gets cheated and kicked around, like a yellar dog. It ain't right and something ought to be done. Branch aims to do it, too.



UP TO this time, Branch has rode the straight and narrow as he sees it. But today he's a changed man. He aims to get his and he knows where to get it. He'll rob that payroll. He'll take that four thousand and start him a good outfit of his own, where nobody can kick him around. And, by God, he'll keep a crate of frog-sticker knives on hand to give to every boy what comes along.

Branch ain't forgot when he was a boy and wanted a frog-sticker knife!

His mind's made up now and he ain't long in hitting the trail out of town toward the railroad construction job. He's made out he wants work of that sort and learned from the snake-eyed wagon-yard man which trail to take. He ain't got no gun for this stick-up job, but he's a heap handier with a rope any time than with a gun. He ain't bothered. He'll rope this payroll messenger out of the saddle and there won't be no call for gun-play. Branch ain't wanting to shoot no innocent man. All he wants is that payroll.

He takes his stand in a clump of chaparral about ten miles out. He backs his dun into the brush and sets silent in his saddle with his loop cocked. To the best of his calculations, this payroll messenger is due any minute now.

He ain't had time to get nervous when he hears a hoss coming hell-bent. Somebody's sure burning the dust. Branch figures that's the way he'd travel if he was riding with four thousand dollars. But he eases his hoss up a little, so he can make sure. He ain't long enough in this hold-up game to take chances.

He just barely gets back out of sight in time. This ain't the man. This is the gent Branch bumps into at the bank corner, the gent who don't take no sass off of nobody. And he ain't packing no satchel on his saddle.

Branch watches this rider spur past and

suddenly finds himself as nervous as a cat on ice. Coming so close to mussing up the deal like this shakes his confidence. He don't realize before what a strain it is on a man's nerve to lead a life of crime. He gets a flash picture of hisself tromping thin air on the end of a hangrope and it sure don't make him happy. If this payroll messenger don't show up quick now, Branch will back out complete.

Five minutes later the rattle of hoofs on rocks tells him another rider is coming. Branch rounds up his scattered nerves and peeks out of his ambush. This is the payroll messenger, all right. He's dressed in city clothes, like a bank clerk, and the satchel is in plain sight.

Branch's heart jumps up in his throat

dun is sure stretched out before him the gap to roping distance. Branch the runaway down hard and is swapping the satchel to his saddle. He likes the feel of it and endures great pain to open it for a look-see at the wealth. But he knows that won't count on the wrong side of the law now; he's got time to waste. He's got to ride.

He takes to the brush, leading the dun. While he's at it, he figures he just turned a hoss thief, too. But he soon finds out he won't do. The bay don't lead. Damn. He's setting back on the heels every chance he gets and slows down Branch's get-away. Branch leads the couple or three miles back in the brush and turns him loose with the reins

Fred Gipson writes the dramatic, colorful story of a young outlawed cowboy who to fight not only the law but his double-crossing owlhoot pards in "STEPSON O OWLHOOT"—an unusually gripping novelette in the current issue of DIME WESTERN—on sale now!

and starts kicking, but he swallows it down and straightens out his loop. Here's where he makes his start in crime!

The running hoss shies from the rope, but he's too late. Branch's loop tightens around the rider's elbows and the rider takes a buster that rattles his teeth. Branch is down out of his saddle quick and piling on his man like wrastling a roped steer.

The victim looks more mad than scared. "What's the meaning of this?" he wants to know.

"This is a hold-up!" says Branch, talking tough.

He rolls the feller over and feels for his guns. There ain't none. This fact surprises Branch a little. How come a payroll messenger without a gun? But Branch ain't got time to bother. The gent's hoss is running loose with that satchel and Branch don't want him to escape.

"You can't do this!" the man on the ground tells Branch, but Branch has done it and gone. He's hit his saddle without touching a stirrup and has slick-heeled the dun into a run. He's gathering up his dragging rope and shaking out a second loop.

The spooked bay hoss knows how to turn his head sideways to keep from tripping on the dragging reins, and Branch's

He don't figure the hoss will go after the rider. The rider'll have a ten-minute back to town. And Branch ought to have a long lead on the law by this time.

♦ ♦ ♦

BRANCH is riding north a ways now and is bothered about the way he's leaving. It's rained here before and the ground's soft. There's no chance of hiding his trail. The thick to hide him from sight, but with sense enough to track a bay through a bog hole can follow his

It's about noon when Branch comes on a shallow water-course and gets an idea. He can ride in the water and leave his tracks for all times. And he can change his direction of travel.

He's been traveling northwest and wouldn't a tracker expect him to turn in that direction? He would. Then Branch will follow this stream south and take him back mighty close to where he pulled his hold-up, but who'd expect him back in that country? Branch knows being wise as a corral full of fools. He takes to the water and rides down

Branch has follered this twistin' water-course for ten mile or better and

a track. He knows he's throwed off any tracker taking his trail. He's feeling purty good. He's pulled a neat job and got away with it. But he realizes now he ain't been smart. No smart man would pull a hold-up without grub enough to see him through on his get-away. The excitement has wore off some now and Old Man Hunger's riding Branch with a rough spur again. If he don't feed before long, he thinks his stomach will turn on his backbone and gnaw it in two. He's hungry as a she-wolf with pups. He could wipe his face with the slack in his belly.

That's about when he spies a log shack setting back on a rise, away from the creek apiece. Branch pulls up to consider. That bank clerk ain't had time to make it back into town afoot yet and spread the scare. If he has, the law'll be riding the brush ten mile upstream, trying to pick up a lost trail. With any luck at all, Branch has got plenty of time for a short snack at the cabin.

He don't hesitate about riding up and asking for a handout here. Country folks is different. They'll feed a man.

A woman comes hurrying out the door before Branch has time to holler hello the house. She's been a purty gal one time, but hard work and worry has knocked off some of the bloom. A gent what looks like Hard Luck's rode him too long is right behind her.

"Come right in, Doc," the gent invites.

Branch don't have time to swaller that one before the woman hands him another joter.

"Hurry, please, Dr. Sessums!" she begs. "I know you've come as soon as you could, but it's seemed years, what with the little feller suffering so."

It's all coming too fast for Branch. The woman grabs his satchel and the man has him down out of the saddle before he can draw a breath to ask what it's all about. When he does, the man looks surprised.

"Don't that cowhand tell you?" he asks.

"It's my boy, Toby. Ankle's broke. Some feller give him a pocket knife in town. He dropped it out of the wagon on the way home and jumped out after it. Ruined his foot, looks like."

"I've got hot water and clean rags ready," the woman tells him.



BRANCH is walking in a dream and his head's spinning when he steps into the house and finds a white-faced kid wallering and moaning on the bed. It's the same kid Branch gives his knife to. His ankle's all blue and green and swol to the size of his head.

The kid gives Branch one look and makes a stab at a grin. "That's the man what gimme the knife," he says.

Branch is beginning to see what kind of a tight he's in now. These folks take him for a doctor and he ain't nothing but a hold-up man.

He don't know what to do and he knows he's got to do it fast. He comes mighty nigh explaining his position before he can catch himself. He could still back out and tell these folks he ain't no doctor, but they might start asking questions and getting suspicious. They'd be sure to remember him later, too. Also, this kid's hurt bad and Branch feels sort of responsible.

The kid's looking at Branch with all the confidence in the world. Branch knows he's got to prove up to this kid. It ain't good for kids to have their faith in a man shook. Branch makes his examination and one look at the injured foot picks up his courage. Branch has hoss-doctored some in his time and he believes the trouble ain't so bad now.

"Don't believe it's broke, ma'am," he says to the woman. "Looks like it's just slipped out of joint. Figure me'n your man can slip it back in place 'thout no trouble."

Which they do.

Branch wraps up the foot tight and tells the man if he'll go dig some prickly-pear root and make a poultice for the kid's ankle, it'll draw the swelling out faster than any doctor medicine. The man hurries out, pleased at the news and happy because his kid ain't hurt as bad as he's expected.

Branch is telling the woman how to fix this poultice, when up rides four men with rifles laying across their saddle bows. Branch takes one look and dies in his tracks. One of them gents is wearing a star on his vest!

The sheriff is a blocky gent with bushy brows and a set of blue eyes that can look right through clothes and hide and see into

the middle of a man. He steps to the door and looks into the middle of Branch. What he sees don't cheer Branch none.

"Howdy, Miz Rogers," the sheriff greets, taking his hat off with one hand and going for his gun with the other. "We're out after a hold-up gent and it looks like we've got him cornered. Lift 'em, feller," he adds for Branch's benefit.

Branch reaches. The surprise has been too complete. He ain't even got the presence of mind to try running a whizzer. If it wasn't for the woman putting in, Branch would confess right there.

"But, Sheriff, you're mistook," says the woman.

"No, ma'am," says the sheriff, convinced. "I don't figure so. This gent's a stranger. He's been seen hanging around town last night and this morning. He leaves town just ahead of a payroll rider bound for the railroad construction job. The rider's carrying four thousand in a satchel and yonder sets a satchel on the floor. It all adds up!"

Branch can see that it all adds up and there's a dry frog hide in his throat he can't swallow. But Miz Rogers is highly indignant.

"But this is the doctor, Sheriff," she insists.

The Sheriff, he tries to be patient with the woman, but he's firm. "Ma'am," he says, "you're not trying to call this gent old Doc Gleason, are you?"

"Of course not!" exclaims the woman. "Old Doc Gleason refused to come out the last time we needed him because we didn't have money to pay him when the bank foreclosed on our stuff. He had to call the new doctor. Dr. Sessums! This ain't no hold-up man."



THE sheriff backs off a little at this and looks Branch over a second time. "Well, I ain't met the new doctor, I'll allow," he confesses. "But you've still got to convince me this is him. First time I ever seen a saddle bow in a doctor's legs and a rope crook in the little finger of his roping hand. I'm still claiming he's the bird we're after and we're lucky to be out at the construction works

when the bank clerk comes walking in to tell about the hold-up. We figured the stick-up man would head this way, bound for the border, so we don't wait to pick up his trail."

He turns to Branch. "What's your story, Dr. Owlhoot?"

Branch ain't got no story he can tell. He's still just standing there reaching for the ceiling and staring around like a blind goose in a hail storm. He couldn't talk right now if somebody put words in his mouth. He's that sick and buffaloed.

The woman saves him again. She snatches up the satchel and approaches the sheriff with a determined look on her face. Ain't no sheriff arresting the man who's helped her boy.

"I'll show you whether he's a doctor or not, Sheriff," she says.

She sets the satchel down in front of the lawman and starts thumbing the catch. In his mind, Branch is yelling at the top of his lungs for her not to open it. But he can't get a sound past the frog hide in his gullet. He ain't drawn a breath, for that matter, since the sheriff rides up.

Then the satchel flops open and Branch sucks in so much wind it staggers him. That bag is stuffed full of nickel-plated gadgets and holds pills enough to cure every stomachache in Texas!

Branch claims he's still standing there with his hands in the air when the sheriff quits apologizing and rides off. It takes him till sundown to corral his spooky nerves and figure the thing out. Branch reckons it's this hard-eyed gent what don't take no sass off of nobody that carries the payroll. Or maybe he's the one that sticks it up. Branch don't never learn which, and at the time, ain't too interested. What takes his eye is the sight of the woman setting the table for supper.

These are pore folks and all they got to eat is turnip greens, clabber milk, and cornbread. But Branch Gurd never tastes nothing better in his life. He eats till he can feel his hide pulling loose from his bones.

That feed tides Branch over till he makes it to the San Saba, where he gets a job and don't have to steal for a living.

Which is all he's after the night he blows into Blanco, in the first place.



"Drop your weapons, gentlemen, and be careful how you handle them."

GUN RIDER FOR THE OVERLAND

CHAPTER ONE

Highway Miners

SHAD SMITH had seen a lot of blood and death, and he could scent trouble almost as far as old Chicken Bill, the stage driver, could spot Paiute

war smoke. Shad had the feel of it now, and he thought of the boiler-iron strongbox there in the front boot.

Monday's was the treasure coach, and this was Wednesday. Yesterday, back at Carson City, Nevada, the Overland agent had told Shad about the dust—seventy thousand in gold—wheeling east

A swift action novel of the stagecoach trail to the Nevada goldfields

By Charles W. Tyler



Word of a seventy-thousand-dollar gold shipment flashed across Nevada ahead of the rocketing stagecoach—to seal the gunsmoke destiny of innocent and guilty alike, at Hell's home station!

through the wilderness in the big stage.

There were four passengers in the coach, including Shad Smith. The two men across, one tall and bony, the other short and compact, sat staring at the shimmering salt flats, looking hot and bored. The neatly dressed man with the burn-sides, on the seat beside him, was nodding drowsily.

Long, tedious hours they had been caged up here, with the only breaks in the monotony the stops at the swing stations and the last home station, where Chicken Bill had picked up the ribbons. Soon they had run out of conversation,

with no one volunteering his identity or any personal information.

They were making about eight slogging miles an hour, which was the average speed of the Concords that hammered at the Overland Trail, from the Big Muddy to the Coast. Bone-jolting miles they were, but to Shad Smith these Abbot, Downing and Company coaches were luxurious compared to the early canvas-topped mud wagons or the old bull trains.

Shad had been a barn boy and a stock tender at early stage stations. Then, one day, he had joined a construction crew of James Gamble, building through from Fort Churchill, Nevada, to meet Creighton, big boss of the Western Union, at Salt Lake City, Utah, and tie in that last splice of telegraph wire which united the Atlantic with the Pacific.

Shad had learned the Morse code, and later he had become a telegraph operator, to work the key at lonely outposts of this Nevada desert. He was twenty-two

now, lean and tough, with straight-looking gray eyes and a courage born of life-and-death battles with the red marauders. Besides the Paiutes, there were also white renegades in the saddle, ruthless bandits and road agents, striking at the Overland stages, as coldly purposeful and cunning, in their way, as the Paiutes.

Highway mining, they called it, this looting of the Concorde.

The lurching stage bumped through endless chuckholes, to the accompaniment of groaning wheels and pounding hoofs. Now it slowed to the drag of a long ascending grade. At the summit there was a stop at the swing station to change horses. Almost before the stock tender had hooked the last trace, Chicken Bill had gathered up the reins and was kicking off the brake.

The stage crossed the high table and began to roll down the slope. Basalt walls closed in. It was rocky going; the road was little more than two ruts in a dry watercourse.

Shad Smith felt himself tightening up. He was thinking about the gold—the treasure box in the front boot.

Charlie Rand was riding gun, perched there on top with Chicken Bill, a sixteen-shot Henry across his knees. He was young, but cool and courageous. Shad had known him a long time.

A good man, Charlie Rand, hard to bluff. Bandits wouldn't take treasure in his charge without a fight.

On the flats below, Shad could see little dust twisters lazily across the white patch of a dry lake. Chicken Bill said something to the gun rider. The brakes scraped, slowing the heavy stage for the sharp turn around the jutting shoulder that was Bandit Bend.

Shad eased the Colt under his coat, his nerves taut. The man with the burn-sides opened his eyes and closed them again.

And then it happened.



THERE was the hard crack of a rifle from behind a boulder somewhere above. The next instant Shad Smith saw the body of the gun-guard sprawling down past the window,

barely missing being mauled by the locked rear wheel.

Shad's lips thinned. In a flash he grabbed for his six-shooter, his blood at the boil. One of the men across cried, "My God, take it easy!"

The hand of the man with the burn-sides snaked out fast and seized Shad's wrist in a steel grip. "You young fool, do you want to get us all killed?"

Came the voice of Chicken Bill, quieting the horses.

The stocky man beyond hunched forward, peering out. "I was afraid of it," he muttered.

The stage lurched to a stop, and almost at once five masked riders closed in. There was a snarled command, "Everybody out! Come down with your hands up!"

The road agent who had killed the gun rider left his place of concealment and slid down the steep bank to seize the bridle reins of the leaders.

A quick glance passed between the two passengers on the opposite seat. The man with the burn-sides seemed calm. He was saying, "Take it easy, gentlemen. A man's life is worth more than a few paltry dollars."

He looked at Shad and shook his head, smiling thinly. "Remember, kid, you'll be a long time dead."

Shad guessed the man with the burn-sides was right. It wasn't his gold. The highwaymen probably wouldn't bother the passengers. Killing Charlie Rand the way they had, showed they were cold-blooded and meant business.

Shad kicked open the door and got down first. The others followed.

The leader of the road agents gestured with his six-shooter. "Drop your weapons, gentlemen, and be careful how you handle them." He was tall, rangy, and his eyes burned hot over the kerchief that concealed the lower part of his face.

"You have a little the advantage," said the man with the burn-sides coolly. "We aim to accommodate." He took a six-shooter from under his coat and tossed it to the ground. The other two followed suit. Shad was last.

He bit his lip; his eyes were sullen. There hadn't been any cause to shoot down Charlie Rand that way.

"Throw off the treasure box," was the next order.

Chicken Bill spat over the wheel, dragged the back of his hand across his lips and leered at the speaker. "Hah! Throw off hell! Come an' git it. Took three men to heave 'er up here. More'n I kin handle."

The leader laughed shortly. "Looks like we hit the jackpot." He nodded at two of his companions. "All right, boys, drag it off."

After some heaving and grunting, the heavy boiler-iron box was up-ended over the front wheel. It landed with a dull thud. The bandit leader dismounted and examined it. It was not large, but solid, with a built-in lock. He looked at the driver.

"The nearest key's at the Wells-Fargo office in Austin, Nevada," said Chicken Bill, "so jist kick 'er open, boys."

The outlaw leader scowled, gave the box a tentative prod with his boot. Opening it without a key would have required a maul and a cold chisel. He looked at the grizzled driver. "Give me the way pocket."

Chicken Bill handed it down. The road agent ran through the contents of the leather pouch. However, there were no waybills listing gold, no Wells, Fargo and Company's receipts for treasure.

The man with the burnside said, "They'd be fools to put waybills for gold where they were easy to find." And he added, a little impatiently, "If you're not satisfied, search the stage, and then let us get on our way."

"I'll do that," rasped the tall highwayman, "and I'll go you one better. We'll take up a little collection while we're about it. I notice you've got a gold nugget for a watch charm."

Shad had noticed the heavy gold chain looped across the ornate vest of the man with the burnside. It had a peanut-shaped yellow nugget charm.

The man with the burnside protested vehemently. "This nugget is from the Mother Lode country, and a man now dead gave it to me. I prize it highly. My watch, too, has associations."

The outlaw leader moved close. "Pass it over! And hurry up about it before I bat you over the head."

The man with the burnside growled something under his breath. The tall road agent cursed him. "Keep your tongue to yourself!"

Besides the watch and chain, there was a weighty poke.

"Gold is where you find it," said the leader with a leer. And to the others: "Your money and valuables, gentlemen."

Shad gave up a few gold pieces and some silver. The other passengers, protesting, surrendered their money belts, heavy with gold dust in small buckskin pouches.

Members of the gang were at the rear boot, jerking out mail sacks and slitting them open. Luggage was smashed open, the contents spilled on the ground. And still the leader seemed unsatisfied.

"Search the inside of the coach," he ordered. "Look under the seats."

One of the men who had occupied the rear seat opened his mouth and quickly closed it again. His companion said, "You have robbed us, and you have the treasure box. In God's name, what more do you expect? Let us go."

A burly road agent thrust him aside, to enter the stage. Another followed.

A few moments later they found the gold in two locked carpet bags beneath miscellaneous articles under the rear seat.

CHAPTER TWO

Dead Man's Vengeance

CHICKEN BILL was too astonished to curse. He gaped at Shad Smith, while tobacco juice oozed from the corner of his mouth. Shad moistened his lips with his tongue. Seventy thousand dollars!

He himself hadn't known that the gold sacks were there under the seat. He had thought, of course, it was in the iron treasure box. Now he understood that this heavily laden box in the front boot had been but a ruse. A Wells-Fargo chest like this was not easy to open; besides its heavy outer lock it had a second lock on the inner compartment.

Evidently those in charge of the gold shipment had reasoned that, because of its weight, any road agents would believe the treasure box contained the loot. It

had been natural to suppose that, once the boiler-iron box was in their possession, they would allow the stage to proceed, not discovering until later, when they smashed it open, that they had been duped. Shad guessed that had been the way those shipping the gold, back there at Carson City, had planned it.

But something had gone wrong. In spite of the secrecy that had cloaked the gold shipment, these road agents at Bandit Bend, well over a hundred miles from Carson City, had learned about it.

There must have been an accomplice in Carson City. But Shad wondered how he had communicated with the outlaws. A rider on a fast horse, perhaps, or a message sent to a member of the band at Canyon Gate, the next telegraph station.

"Them hombres at Carson City thought they'd play smart," sneered the bandit chief, "but they wa'n't smart enough." He waved his six-shooter. "All right, get back aboard."

Shad had been looking at the horses, making mental notes of their markings. He was going to take over the telegraph key at Canyon Gate station, relieve an operator named Larry McLane, and he would be around this country a spell. He might see these fellows again. He wouldn't know them, of course, but he would know the horses.

There was a clay-bank dun, a blaze-faced sorrel, a rangy gelding with four white stockings, a big bay.

Shad's blood was hot with resentment over the killing of Charlie Rand. He stole a glance at the guns on the ground, recklessly debating the possibility of making a fight of it. It was a thin chance, a fool-hardy one, but gunsmoke was in his blood. He'd been fighting here in Nevada almost as long as he could remember. That was the law of the wasteland—fight or die.

The two passengers who had occupied the rear seat and the man with the burn-sides climbed into the stage, looking dejected, glum.

Shad looked back at the sprawled shape of Charlie Rand in the dust. "We can't leave him here for the buzzards," he said, addressing no one in particular.

"All right, heave him inside," growled the leader. "But hurry up about it."

Shad went back and struggled to lift

the body of Charlie Rand. He staggered to the coach with the dead man in his arms. Something hard pressed against him, and his eyes suddenly turned smoky. That hard something was the dead guard's holstered six-shooter. . . .

Chicken Bill kicked off the brake and popped his whip. As the Concord began to roll, Shad Smith suddenly snatched the Colt from the holster of the dead man on the floor and fired from the open window.

Came a startled yell, and one of the road agents clutched at his belly, took a stumbling step or two and fell. A second crashing shot knocked down a horse, throwing the others into confusion.

There were angry shouts, and shots. Lead battered the stage, a bullet snarled through a window, splinters exploded from the door post. The stocky passenger, railing curses, grabbed Shad's arm.

"Are you crazy? Stop it!"

Shad twisted away, striking at the other with the barrel of the Colt. He leaned from the window and drove a last bullet at the road agents. Another of the gang staggered, stumbled to hands and knees.

"We tagged a couple of 'em, Charlie," Shad said to the dead guard. "Your gun, too. That evens it up a little." He dropped onto the cushion beside the man with the burn-sides.

The coach was careening wildly down the grade, heaving and straining on the great leather through-braces. The wheels were banging and bouncing.

Chicken Bill, gnarled hands gripping the reins, was squalling ribald curses.

"One of those bullets didn't miss me by an inch," wheezed the stocky man, rubbing his shoulder where the barrel of the Colt had landed. He glowered at Shad.

"I never figured that fightin' off bandits was the job of passengers," said the man with the burn-sides.

"You fellers would fight if they was Paiutes," Shad said angrily. "Folks stagin' across Nevada got to figger to handle a gun. Anyhow, I ain't just a passenger."

The brows of the man beside him went up. "You work for the Overland?"

"Just the same as," said Shad. "I'm a telegraph operator, an' when guns get to swingin' I help out any place I happen to be."

"Oh, that's different," said the man with the burnside. He eyed Shad curiously.

"Where are you stationed?"

"I'm takin' over for a feller at Canyon Gate."

The stage wheeled off the grade and took to the rutted road across the flats, speed unabated. The occupants, silent now, lurched back and forth, hanging grimly to the armstraps. Dust cast out its flaunting pennon.

The sprawl of buildings that was the station at Canyon Gate appeared ahead. Chicken Bill, as was his custom, announced his coming with a coyote yell that made the sagebrush quiver. With trace-chains rattling, brakes rasping, the six lathered horses swung up to the low-roofed barn.

This was the end of the drive for Chicken Bill. Here was a home station, with sleeping quarters, dining room, telegraph office, blacksmith shop, sheds and corrals.

There was an expectant group waiting—bearded freighters, swamper, the barn help, the blacksmith and others. When a reinsman like Chicken Bill was late it usually meant trouble between stations.



CHICKEN BILL threw the reins to the hostler and told what had happened in a high cackle. "Road agents jumped us at Bandit Bend! Bushed Charlie Rand 'fore he could raise up his gun."

Shad Smith and the others got out of the stage. Jud Rawlins, the station master, joined the group. He nodded at Shad and said, "Howdy, Mr. Catlin," to the man with the burnside. He listened, frowning, to the talk.

"Treasure box weighed a ton," Chicken Bill was saying. "Dunno what was in it, but they found the gold in a couple locked sacks under the back seat."

"How much?" someone questioned.

"I dunno, but plenty, I reckon," said the driver. "Them sacks was mighty hefty."

"Seventy thousand," said the tall, thin passenger.

There was a murmur of surprise, and curious eyes dwelt on this man.

"What do you know about it?" demanded Chicken Bill, glowering.

"It was in the care of Mr. Ellis here and myself," the other told him. "My name is Marston."

"We represent merchants in Virginia City," said the stocky man, mopping his perspiring face. "We were on our way to St. Louis to purchase goods."

"We took it to Carson City several days ago," Marston went on. "There we made the final arrangements with Wells-Fargo and the Overland agent. A regular treasure box was loaded with pouches of low-grade ore, but the gold was placed aboard at the Overland barn under cover of darkness. In case of a holdup, we felt that the highwaymen would not search the stage, once they were in possession of the Wells-Fargo chest."

"Been a good trick if it had worked," said a freighter.

Jud Rawlins frowned. "Ye likely was followed from Virginia City, an' somebody was watchin' when the gold was loaded. I had an idea right along that the road agents kept a spotter in Carson, the way they always seem to know when a stage is carryin' gold."

"But how'd they git word ahead?" put in another.

Jud Rawlins shrugged, but his glance slid away toward the telegraph office.

"Looks like they shot ye up some," remarked the stock tender, examining the

While highway miners and Indians were raising thirteen kinds of hell in Nevada, blue-coated troopers in the Northwest wilderness wasted good fighting-hours on parade for Washington brass-hats—till a veteran sergeant risked his stripes in revolt! You'll want to read Thomas Calvert McClary's "Cavalrymen Never Die," one of four novelettes in November ACE-HIGH! Now on sale.

bullet holes in the body of the Concord and the rear boot.

The man named Marston told what had happened after Shad Smith had opened up on the bandits.

"Plugged a couple of 'em," Chicken Bill said exultantly. "Ye're all right, Shad. Ye kin ride the box with me any day."

Men lifted out the body of Charlie Rand and carried it into the harness room, and the hostler began unhooking the traces. Shad went toward the telegraph office, his mind filled with conjecture and mounting suspicion.

Somebody in Carson City had contacted members of the outlaw gang, sending word about the gold. A telegraph message, its real meaning veiled in the wording, might have been the method used. Still the road agents hadn't known where the dust was hidden when they stopped the stage, or they wouldn't have bothered with the treasure box.

Their clue to its whereabouts had come later. Shad wondered if one of the men in charge of the gold might not have betrayed his trust. He thought of Ellis, the chunky man, grabbing him when he opened up on the robbers with Charlie Rand's six-shooter. . . . Still, this holdup was none of his affair; he was just a telegraph operator.

CHAPTER THREE

Pilgrim Weakling

SHAD SMITH spoke to the gaunt youth in the doorway. "I guess you're Larry McLane."

The other nodded. He seemed about Shad's age. Unusually bright eyes were set deep in his pinched face. His skin held a chalky pallor. He was staring toward the stage and the men by the barn, hardly noticing the newcomer.

"They sent me to relieve you. Shad Smith's the name."

McLane looked at Shad then, and held out his hand. His grip was limp, clammy. It was like getting hold of a dead fish.

"You got here sooner than I expected," McLane said. He added a little petulantly, "They didn't send me word you were coming."

"Was they supposed to?" Shad asked.

"It was the least they could have done," McLane said, surly-voiced. "Give me a chance to pick up my stuff and I'll be glad to get out of this God-forsaken place."

"You'll have time enough," Shad said. Obviously McLane was an Easterner, a tenderfoot. He seemed out of place. Most of the telegraphers along the line were tough, seasoned sons, used to hardships and dangers, and not given to grumbling.

McLane was looking toward the barn again. "What happened?"

"Road agents," Shad said briefly. "They killed the gun rider, Charlie Rand."

McLane shrugged his narrow shoulders, offering no word of surprise, expressing no sorrow.

Shad said, "What's the matter? Don't you like it out here?"

"Like it? I hate it! I'm going back where I came from."

"Where's that?" Shad asked.

"Boston," McLane told him.

"Boston is a long piece."

"I'd never left there in the first place," McLane said sourly, "if it hadn't been for sis. . . . 'Well, come in. Where's your luggage?'"

"Back in the sagebrush."

Inside, McLane waved his hand at the telegraph instruments. "It's all yours. Help yourself. I'll throw my things together. I'm going to get that stage out."

"You'll have plenty of time," Shad said. "They're goin' to send a wagon back to Bandit Bend to pick up the mail."

He sat down at the key and called Carson City, reporting his arrival. Then he sent a message to the division superintendent concerning the stage robbery and the killing of the guard.

When Shad had finished sending, McLane said, "I ought to have known better than to come out here in the first place. To hell with this pioneer stuff! The East is good enough for me."

He told Shad that his father had been killed in the Civil War, and that his mother had died not long afterward. The family had been wealthy at one time, but the war and bank failures had left McLane and his sister penniless.

"I learned telegraphy," Larry McLane said, "and about that time sis read some

stuff Horace Greely wrote in the New York Tribune. She kept after me to follow his advice about going West—and, like a fool, I consented."

"Hank Monk, who handled a six-whip on the California end of the Overland, met Mr. Greeley when he staged through some years ago," Shad observed. "Hank thought he was a great man."

"He was a great liar," snarled McLane. "Called it a land of opportunity. Bah! There's nothing but desert and savages."

"Reckon opportunity is like gold," Shad said. "It's where you find it. Takes a heap of scratchin' sometimes."

"You sound like sis," sneered McLane. "She is always preaching about how anything worth having is worth fighting for. What have I got to fight for? All I've got is one lung and a cough."

"You're alive, anyhow," Shad said. "They tell that the cowards never started West an' that the weak ones died on the way."

McLane cursed and flapped his hand. "Don't talk to me about the West."

"Nevada air is right healin' for weak lungs," Shad said. "Better change your mind an' stick around. We might make a man out of you."

"A man?" McLane cried derisively. "Say, you're no older than I am, but you put on as though you were a hundred."

"In this country," Shad told him, "a kid turns into a man along about the time he can sight a gun. My folks was Forty-niners. Ma died on the road; dad was killed by redskins. I had to get out an' shuck for myself 'fore I was knee-high to a tall Indian."

"You and I are different," McLane said.

Shad shrugged. "I reckon."

"Paiutes attacked the swing at Soldier Holes a couple weeks ago," McLane went on. "They scalped the stock tender and cut out his tongue. They pulled down the wires, and I was told that I'd have to go out and repair the line. But I didn't—not me."

"Keepin' the wire workin' is part of a telegrapher's job," Shad said. "You ain't no better than the next feller."

"Perhaps not, but I'm smarter. 'There's other ways of making money

beside risking your life for the telegraph company at forty dollars a month. I'm going to Austin, and I'm going to get drunk and stay drunk a week. Then I'm going back East. Plenty jobs back there."

"Where's your sister?" Shad asked.

"Oh, she works in the dining room." McLane jerked his head toward a long building not far from the telegraph office.

"What's she goin' to do, throw up her job too?" Shad said.

McLane shook his head. "She's going to stay on here for awhile. Help is hard to get and she won't leave them in the lurch." He grimaced. "Anyway, she likes the damn country."

"Seems like there's more'n just weak lungs the matter with you," Shad said disgustedly.

"What?" McLane demanded darkly.

"They paint the wheels of them Concordes the same color. Ever notice? They're yellor."

"Yellow?" McLane's hands clenched; his face was alive with fury. "You—you can't say that to me!"



SHAD SMITH heard footsteps and turned. The prettiest girl he had ever seen came breezing through the door. Brimming with youth and vigor, she looked about nineteen or twenty. She sparkled like a spanking new Abott, Downing coach just out of the Concord, New Hampshire, shops.

"Wasn't it awful about the stage robbers?" she said breathlessly. She stopped to stare at Shad. "Oh!"

Larry McLane managed to wipe the rage from his face and get control of his voice, though a thin sneer persisted. "This is Shad Smith, the new operator. He came in on the stage." His eyes skimmed Shad. "Meet my sister, Betty, Mr. Smith."

Shad got to his feet, dragging off his dust-frosted hat. "Howdy, miss."

Betty McLane's gaze was level, frankly curious. "How do you do, Mr. Smith. I have just been hearing that you are quite a hero."

Shad felt uncomfortable. "Doin' what you was fetched up to ain't bein' a hero," he said stiffly.

"He never gets scared," McLane said unpleasantly. "Why, he and Kit Carson have been fighting Indians for years."

"I been scairt lots of times," Shad said. "A man who don't get scairt in a tight ain't got much sense."

"See, he's smart, too," taunted McLane.

"Don't be rude, Larry," the girl said. And to Shad, apologetically: "It's just his way."

"I notice he's got funny ways," Shad said.

"We have been in Nevada only a few months," the girl explained. "The country is still strange and a little frightening to both of us."

"I been tellin' him how healthy it was out here," said Shad. "I mean—well, you know."

"Healthy!" hooted McLane. "It wasn't healthy for the stock tender at Soldier Holes, or that Wells-Fargo messenger they just unloaded, or the others who have been shot and scalped."

"Men dyin' with their boots on help a country get settled up," said Shad. "Nevada ain't no place for quitters."

The girl looked from one to the other, frowning. "What is the matter with you two?" she demanded.

"He called me yellow because I'm getting out," McLane's voice was close to a whine.

The girl whirled on Shad, her eyes flaming. "You had no right to say that. My brother is sick. If I was a man, I—I'd make you take it back."

"Looks like you got the fightin' blood in the family, miss," Shad said. "I'll gamble you could put up a right lively tussle, for bein' a girl an' pretty an' all."

"I think you're hateful!" the girl cried, and flounced out, followed by her brother. . . .

Jud Rawlins, the station master, came in. "Better telegraph Austin that the stage will be way late," he told Shad. "We got to send a team back to pick up that mail."

Morse clicked out under Shad's expert hand. A few minutes later the operator at Austin, Nevada, the end of the next drive east, called Canyon Gate, and the armature banged out fast dots and dashes.

Shad translated it for Jud Rawlins.

"The Overland agent at Austin advises holding the stage until mornin'. Paiutes are on the prowl at Reese River, west of there. The west-bound stage is comin' through, but soldiers are ridin' it to Fort Churchill."

Shad went to the barn with Rawlins. The horses that had been waiting to pull the stage on to Soldier Holes, the next swing station, twelve miles east, were unharnessed. Then the stock tender and the barn boy hooked two animals to the box-bodied wagon that would return to pick up the mail and luggage at the scene of the holdup.

A brassy sun rode high overhead; heat devils danced on the flats. Flies were buzzing in the harness room, where Charlie Rand lay under a horse blanket. Flies pestered the horses. Flies and barn smells and dirt.

Shad thought of Betty McLane, and his eye took in the loose sprawl of buildings. Franie and 'dobe and stone, built with an eye to standing off Indian attack. Most of them were sod-roofed. There were haystacks and wood piles and the wagons of the freighters, and that empty stage, carrying scars of this and other attacks.

Shad guessed Canyon Gate was tough on a girl raised up in Boston. Jud Rawlins had told him that her brother was drunk half the time—just no account.

McLane had said, "There's other ways of making money." Shad frowned.

The cook hammered on the broken wheel-tire, hung to a bracket at the corner of the dining room, and men began straggling that way. Shad washed at the bench outside, dried himself on the flour-sack towel and slicked his hair with the comb hung on a string beside the piece of a mirror. Then he found a place at the long table inside.

When the business of eating was done, talk began. Catlin, the man with the burn-sides, spoke of mining property near Austin, and of claims being developed in the Shoshones, off south of Canyon Gate. His men there had opened up a dike, which gave promise. He spoke of the Mother Lode country in California, and gave the impression that he had once owned a piece of the Comstock at Virginia City.

Catlin seemed about thirty-odd, Shad thought. A man of affairs, exact and pre-

cise, who was annoyed by small things being out of place. Shad noticed how his fingers strayed to his vest front now and then, as though he had been in the habit of toying with the missing chain and that gold nugget charm.

Ellis, the stocky passenger, had been drinking. He was dour, silent. His companion, Marston, spoke of the robbery again, puzzled how word had come ahead.

"A rider could have done it," someone suggested.

"Seems like they'd stood up the stage nearer Carson City," another put in. "A hundred an' twenty miles to Bandit Bend. Long ride."

Shad Smith said, "Figger it this way. A man in Carson City telegraphed somebody here, an' the message, say, was in code."

Betty McLane, who had been waiting on table, let a plate fall. It shattered on the stone floor.

CHAPTER FOUR

Guns in the Dark

OLD CHICKEN BILL said, "Could be. The lightnin' wire is the white man's war-smoke, like the Gosh-Utes say."

Jud Rawlins nodded, lids narrowed. Canyon Gate was a holdover stop for freighters, a hangout for drifters and cowboys bringing cattle in from California. A message regarding the treasure shipment might easily have found its way into the hands of some member of a renegade band here.

Larry McLane slanted a look at Shad, his pasty features twisted into a grimace of hatred. "There hasn't been a message coming in here for a week except stage business and reports of wire trouble."

"You ought to know," Shad said, and put on his hat and went out, finding relief from the stifling closeness and greasy cooking odors in the clean sunlight.

Shad smoked a cigarette in the shade beside the telegraph office, going in finally to answer the call of the racketing sounder.

It was a message from Charlie Rand's wife. She wanted her husband buried at Canyon Gate. Shad understood. It was

too far to try and take him home, with the heat and everything.

The wagon returned from Bandit Bend a little later. The luggage and the weapons that had been recovered there were returned to their rightful owners. The road agents, it seemed, had quit the scene in a hurry, leaving a dead horse.

Jud Rawlins had the mail sacks sewed up, and he stowed them in his office pending the departure of the stage for Austin in the morning.

Charlie Rand was buried that afternoon, joining the little group of weed-grown mounds a short distance from the station. At least it was an escape from the heat and the flies in the harness room, Shad thought.

The sun wheeled down behind the mountain rims to the west. A last dust twister on the flats waltzed away in the brief twilight like a departing ghost.

It was Chicken Bill who first sighted war-smoke on a shoulder of the Shoshones, smudging up against the sky to the southwest, just before dark. The grizzled driver had been asleep, and was out having a look around, with his customary alertness.

There was talk of Indians in the dining room later, there at the crude bar across the end of the room.

"Ain't a fur piece from them claims of yours, Catlin," Jud Rawlins observed. "The boys better be gittin' in if they want to keep their hair."

"I hope they have sense enough to move out," said Catlin.

Chicken Bill told about the time Gosh-Utes raided unlucky Canyon Station, across the Nevada-Utah line, killing and scalping Deaf Bill Riley, the stock tender, and some soldiers from Fort Douglas.

"One of the soldiers was bald as a wagon-tire," said Chicken Bill, "an' I guess he was a problem, but a red varmint solved that by skinnin' off his beard."

The Salt Lake coach pulled in at eight with a thousand pounds of mail, six soldiers and four passengers. There had been a brush with a small party of Paiutes west of the Mt. Airy swing station, but, running into the hot fire of repeating Spencers, the warriors had soon withdrawn.

Chicken Bill picked up the ribbons of the fresh horses, and the stage pulled out. Then there was only stillness and stars wrapped around the huddle of buildings at Canyon Gate.

In the telegraph office, Shad listened to the chattering sounder. The Austin operator told him that the sheriff and posse had refused to chance a seventy-mile ride through a country crawling with Paiutes, on the thin chance that the posse might come up with the road agents, for the bandits had a long start and were probably well out of the country, being themselves aware of the Indian threat.

The room still held the heat of the day, and Shad went outside. A vague but persistent warning of danger whispered in the back of his mind. A man brought up in this country learned to heed such instincts. At best, trouble was never far away.

Shad, his Navy Colt stuck in the waistband of his trousers, stood for a while in the shadows, looking around. His nostrils picked up the smell of sage and hot earth cooling off. Here and there a light glowed. Somewhere there was the low run of voices. A horse whinnied.

Shad walked past the dining room. Through the open door, he saw Marston and two or three others at the bar, a whiskey bottle and glasses in front of them. A poker game was going on at a table in the corner. McLane had been there earlier, drinking, but he was not around now. Ellis and Catlin had evidently turned in.



DRAWN by the light in the station master's quarters, Shad stopped in for a word with Jud Rawlins and his wife. Mrs. Rawlins was the only woman beside Betty McLane at the station. She was rotund and genial. Shad had come to know and like them both when the telegraph line had been building through.

"I'm glad that Larry McLane's goin'," Mrs. Rawlins said after a little. "He's drunk half the time. Jist a no-account. Betty's as sweet as she kin be, an' she fusses over him like he was a baby."

Jud brought up the possibility of a tele-

graph message having been delivered to a member of the renegade band here at Canyon Gate. He said a man named McCollum, who was working a claim out south somewhere, had been hanging around a week or so, but had pulled out the day before.

Shad's brows furrowed. "A year or so ago a telegraph operator from California was tellin' me about a man named McCollum. He made a clutch up the hill from Placerville. The driver of the stage he robbed recognized him, but they never did get him, accordin' to this telegrapher."

"Pears like when Californy gits too hot fer a lot of them road agents," said Mrs. Rawlins, "they light out fer Nevada."

"This McCollum didn't look like a miner to me," Jud said.

"What was he ridin'?" Shad asked.

"A chestnut gelding with four white stockin's. His pack horse was a big bay."

"The stage robbers had some horses like those," Shad said.

"I bet seven hundred dollars McCollum was one of 'em," growled the station master. "I mind now that this hombre hung around the telegraph office a lot."

"Wouldn't wonder a mite," said Mrs. Rawlins, tight-lipped, "if Larry McLane was mixed up in it. He's got a sneaky look."

"Might be a good idea to telegraph the sheriff to arrest him when he gets to Austin," Jud allowed. "Mebbe he'd tell somethin'."

Mrs. Rawlins shook her head. "The thing is done, an' there ain't a mite of proof. Betty is proud as Lucifer of the McLane blood. Her folks was somebodies back in Boston. If the boy was arrested it would break her heart. . . ."

Shad Smith was on his way back to the telegraph office when he suddenly became aware of a shape hard against a 'dobe wall. He pulled up, and a voice snarled at him, low and savage, "So I'm yellow, am I? Well, I'll show you!"

It was Larry McLane, weaving a little unsteadily on his wide-spread feet, his hot breath giving off the stink of cheap whiskey. In his hand he clutched a six-shooter, its muzzle leveled on Shad.

Shad's brain worked fast. Any instant

that gun might roar into deadly bloom, for McLane was mean-drunk and filled with the resentment he had been nursing.

"Indian fighter!" McLane sneered, his voice harsh. He was breathing hard, fighting off that hacking cough. "All right, say something!"

Shad said, "Look, did you ever see a man kickin' at the end of a rope?" He'd got to untrack the tenderfoot's whiskey-drenched brain before it exploded and yanked at that tensed trigger-finger.

"What do you mean?" McLane said.

"They hang a killer pretty quick in Nevada. 'It would be tough on your sister.'"

"You can't talk out of it," McLane said thickly.

"They wouldn't even bury you beside Charlie Rand an' them others," Shad went on. "But off by yourself. An' they'd paint on a board, 'McLane—outlaw.'"

"Outlaw?" McLane's voice hushed. He stared at Shad.

"Sure," Shad said. "You passed the word to McCollum about that gold comin' through. McCollum is a California robber."

McLane gasped, as though from a surprise blow. A cough racked him and he steadied himself against the wall. Shad suddenly felt sorry for him. The kid was only a human shell, caught in a sweep of country that was too big for him.

In that instant Shad's desert-bred sixth sense warned of a new danger. His ears were almost as finely tuned as those of an animal, and now a small sound reached him, there in the shadows to the left. He whipped half around, eyes drilling into the muddy gloom along a building.

A shadow was there—a human shape at a half-crouch. Shad snatched at his six-shooter, as a blasting gun drew a bright scratch against the night. There was the snarling rush of a bullet.

Shad's gun roared, but his bullet was wide for the bushwhacker was shifting position. McLane uttered a small squeal of fright. Shad jerked around and kicked the fellow's feet from under him. The killer's gun was slamming, and lead battered the 'dobe.

Shad, jumping for the corner, threw a shot at the flashes, but the thud of running feet told him he had missed again.

Came then an instant of stunned silence, drawing its blanket over Canyon Gate.

CHAPTER FIVE

Pirates of the Overland

DOORS were flung open, and figures were running across the yellowed mats of light. There were yells and questioning voices. Men closed in, some of them adjusting clothing hastily pulled on. Betty McLane was there, and Mrs. Rawlins.

"What the hell's goin' on?" This was Jud, a lantern held high, as he peered at the pale faces there.

McLane, sobered now, was on his feet, looking dazed, scared. His gun had disappeared; Shad had taken care of that. He'd been thinking about the girl. His lean face was tight, grim, as he took count of those surging up.

Shad saw the two gold guards, Marston and Ellis, and Catlin, the miner, yammering with the others, trying to find out what had happened. McLane's eyes were on him now, staring from their bloodshot wells, his jaw slack.

"I was talkin' to McLane here," Shad said, hewing to the truth but showing a fine disregard for certain details, "an' somebody opened up on us."

Anger rumbled from Jud Rawlins. "So we've got a killer at the station?" He peered around him, his bearded face stony. "There's worse than Paiutes."

The man named Ellis said, "I heard this lunger tellin' he was goin' to kill Shad Smith." He glared at McLane.

"I was drunk," mumbled the tenderfoot, his eyes turned desperate, as he glanced at his sister.

"Larry!" the girl cried.

Shad whirled on Ellis. "You close your mouth, mister!"

"Don't you tell me to shut up!" snapped the other. There was whiskey on his breath and his mood was ugly. "Damn queer how word about the gold beat us to Bandit Bend, wasn't it? Well, if you ask me, it went over the wire. These two are telegraphers. Smith was in Carson City, an' he came through on the stage—"

"You're crazy!" cried Rawlins. "Shad

was the only one of you fellers who had guts enough to make a fight of it back there."

"Somebody tipped off the robbers about the gold," Ellis persisted angrily, "an' where it was hid on the stage. This shorthorn an' Smith quarreled. I heard the talk at the bar." Ellis looked at McLane. "You told that he called you yeller."

"I think you're wrong about these boys, Ellis," said Catlin, the miner.

"You've been broodin' about losin' the gold, Luke," put in Marston, trying to pacify Ellis, "and you've been drinkin'. Take it easy now."

"Me an' McLane had words today," Shad said, "but that's just between us two."

"Where's the sheriff?" demanded Luke Ellis. "Why isn't he here?" He glared at Shad. "You never telegraphed to him!"

"That's a lie," Shad said, flat-toned. "An' if you don't shut up, I'll bat you one." His fists clenched. "You was the one who tried to stop me makin' a fight of it back there."

"This is not gettin' us anywhere, gentlemen," said Jud Rawlins with an air of finality. "Break it up now. Go on back to your quarters—all of you."

Abuse flowed from Ellis, but Marston led him away. The others returned to the bar or their sleeping quarters. Betty McLane and her brother followed Shad into the telegraph office.

McLane was shaky, and there were tears in his terror-bright eyes. He held out his hand to Shad. "I deserved the things you said to me today," he said. "Forgive me for—threatening to kill you just now." He told his sister what had happened.

"That's all right," Shad said. "You wouldn't done it if you hadn't been drinkin'." He added, "But that other hombre meant business. I figger he aimed to kill both of us."

"I think so," McLane said. Then: "Tomorrow I want to talk to you and Mr. Rawlins."

"I have heard about the gallantry of western men," Betty McLane said, low-voiced, her eyes shining, "and you have demonstrated it in a way my brother and I will never forget, Shad Smith."

"It wa'n't nothin', miss," Shad said, and grinned at her boyishly. "I expect Nevada looks pretty tough to you folks, but it's settlin' up."

"It's your kind that is doing it," Betty McLane said with deep feeling. Suddenly she kissed him. Quick, impulsive, it was, and fair on the lips. The close warmth of her body, the moist pressure of her mouth, remained with Shad Smith after they were gone, and left him flushed and a little giddy.



FIVE riders rode slowly into Canyon Gate station from the south. One drooped in the saddle, groaning now and then. Another, a tall man, cast a wary eye around and reined in by the haystacks.

"I guess it's safe enough," the tall man said at last. "The stage went on to Austin hours ago."

"The way it was travelin' the last I saw of it," another added with grim humor, "it could be in Salt Lake."

"There's a stage by the barn," one them commented.

"Hell, it's an extra one prob'ly," the tall man said.

"We're safer here than out there at the hole-up," a weak, tired voice said. "The Shoshone Mountains are alive with Paiutes."

"How is it, Kurd?" the tall man asked. "I'm dyin'," whined the injured man. "Git me off this horse."

"You're in better shape than McColum," snarled the tall man. "The coyotes will be workin' on him by now."

"I don't like this," a fourth member of the group spoke up. "I'm for pushin' on to the rendezvous outside of Austin. We'd be there a little after daylight."

"Not with Kurd, we wouldn't," said the tall man. "Now listen. Here's our story: We had a brush with Paiutes an' a man was shot. We want to leave him an' have 'em telegraph Austin for a doc. We'll stable up, get a good night's sleep, have breakfast an' then shove off."

"Lucky we had a change of horses at the hideout," one of the others observed. "That stage driver likely told the markings of the animals we was ridin'."

"Smart men figger those things out beforehand," the tall man said. "Come on."

Over an hour had passed since the last light had winked out at Canyon Gate. Into the silence crept the *clip-clop* of walking horses. The five riders approached the barn.

A sleepy hostler appeared in answer to the tall man's hail and lighted a lantern. Jud Rawlins came out, listened to the tall man's talk.

"Like for us to dress the wound?" the station master asked, looking at the wounded man.

"Ain't nothin' you can do," the tall man said.

"All I want," groaned the man named Kurd, "is to lie down an' be let alone."

Jud directed his removal to a bunk in a building adjoining the stage office. The hostler hung his lantern on a peg, and the riders removed their saddlebags and blanket rolls and stripped off the gear.

"We'll just spread our blankets in the barn here," the tall man decided. "Like fer an early breakfast, an' we'll get goin'."

A door in a room of the sleeping quarters had eased open, and a dark figure there watched the men caught by the lantern light at the barn. His lidded eyes were alert.

The lantern went out at last. The night wind sent small feet scampering through the sage. Somewhere there was a coyote's brief, hysterical laughter. A shooting star drew a scratch across the heavens.

The man from the sleeping quarters moved toward the barn, and at last a guarded voice spoke: "Jorg. Jorg!"

The tall man stirred, growled an oath, then jerked up quickly, peering sharply at this dimly outlined figure. He spoke a name.

"What brought you here?" the voice said.

"Couldn't take a chance with the Indians," the tall man told him. "An' Kurd's shot up." And he added, "McCollum is dead."

"I'm bunked up in a private room," the other said. "Come along. I want to talk to you."

"I thought you'd be in Austin 'fore this," the tall man said.

"The stage didn't go to Austin."

DAWN was washing the eastern sky when Jud Rawlins awoke Shad Smith and told of the coming of the five riders.

"They look like hardcases to me," Rawlins said, "and one of 'em has been shot. Claimed it was Paiutes. I want you to take a look at their horses."

Shad swung out of the bunk in the corner of the telegraph office and began pulling on his trousers, sharp excitement running through him. He waited until the cook pounded the breakfast call, then went toward the barn.

The barn boy pointed out the horses, and Shad shook his head, disappointed. "Might have known them road agents wouldn't risk comin' here," he said. "These're not their horses."

Shad remembered then that they had put Charlie Rand's rifle in the harness room when they had brought it in yesterday, and he went there to have a look at it.

He found the brass-trimmed Henry and picked it up. Shad handled it almost lovingly. He liked a rifle. He'd take a rifle over a six-shooter every time. A Ballard, a Sharps, a Spencer—they were all good. But a Henry, that was a gun! Sixteen shots. Load it on Sunday, the old-timers said, an' shoot it all week.

Shad looked to see that the muzzle was free of dirt, and cracked the magazine, noticing that there was a cartridge in the chamber.

There were voices outside now. Men were straggling that way as they came from the dining room. Shad stood the Henry just inside the door and went out. He saw four men he didn't know. Suddenly their eyes were hitting at him—hard. One—the taller—smiled thinly, his hawk-bright eyes dwelling on the lean-framed Shad for a long instant.

Jud Rawlins had come up, and stood watching, stiffly alert, wary. A six-shooter was belted around his waist. The four men began screwing down their gear. They were dressed differently than the road agents had been. Nothing tied in.

Shad's eye flicked toward Rawlins and he shook his head, a small movement back and forth once. They were tying on the saddlebags now. They seemed heavy, and Rawlins remarked on it.

"Silver concentrates," the tall man said. "We been workin' a dike out here."

"You ain't Catlin's men?" Rawlins inquired.

The tall man gave him a dead, cold stare. "Who's Catlin?"

Suddenly Shad felt himself tightening up. That voice was familiar, as were the tall man's movements—the way he carried himself, that stiff-legged walk, the aggressive thrust of his wide shoulders.

Shad tried to visualize this tall man with a mask on, but the pieces didn't fit. The leader of the stage robbers had worn a flat-crowned black hat with tie thongs under his chin. This man's hat was gray, sweat-stained, with a sloppy brim. The shirt and vest were different.

Shad felt as if every nerve in his body was knotting up at the pit of his stomach. He was convinced that here was the tall renegade of Bandit Bend. He was sure, and still not sure enough.

These men were tough looking, and they were heavily armed. If he went shootin' off his mouth, just on account of a hunch, there would be trouble.

The stock tender was bringing out the horses that would haul the stage on its belated run to Austin. Marston and Ellis were coming from the dining room. Catlin was with them.

Suddenly Shad Smith stiffened, every nerve honed razor-sharp, as the thing exploded before his eyes. He backed up one step, putting his back hard against the edge of the harness room door.

His brain was clear now. Everything was in sharp focus—the events of yesterday and this morning. He saw Charlie Rand's body spilling from the high seat of the stage, saw that fresh mound of raw earth yonder, saw the Henry, loaded and ready, there within the reach of his arm.

He, Shad Smith, was the gun rider now, taking Charlie Rand's place. The gun rider of the Overland!

CHAPTER SIX

Fight Out or Die

THE tall man was still watching Shad. He hadn't seen the three men coming up, as he tested the cinch and gave the horn a tentative tug.

"Who's Catlin?" the tall man had said.

Shad Smith pointed with a quick slant of his eyes. "That's Catlin!"

Catlin had washed and freshened up. He looked neat and precise, with everything just so. He was puffing on a cheroot, calm, complacent.

"Did I hear my name mentioned?" he asked.

"I reckon," Shad said, tight-lipped. Funny, when a showdown came, how a man turned cool an' his nerves quit jumpin', with just his heart poundin' a little faster than normal.

Catlin looked at him, puzzled by the thing he saw on the lean telegrapher's face.

"Well, we'll be gettin' on," the tall man was saying. He stabbed a look around, picked up the bridle reins.

Shad said, "Just a minute, mister. I think we got some business with you."

The tall man rifled a glance at him. "What's on your mind, kid?" The others were watching, suddenly alert.

"Plenty," said Shad. Then he looked at Catlin, the man with the burnside, and his tone was edged like a cutting blade: "*What time is it?*"

Shad reached through the door of the harness room and snatched up the Henry. He cocked the .44 repeater, cradled it against him and swung the muzzle to cover the tall man and the three riders with him.

"The first one of you bandits that makes a move is goin' to stop a hunk of lead!" Shad said through his teeth.

Catlin, wearing a look of stunned dismay, froze in his tracks, the telegrapher's interrogation still ringing in his ears. "What time is it?" The fellow was crazy. The thing didn't make sense.

Then something exploded in Catlin's brain. He knew now, and he knew that Shad Smith knew. He was trapped. He had been whipped by habit. All of his fine scheming—tracing down gold shipments back at Carson City, getting word ahead by telegraph, his riding through on this last trip, tipping off Jorg about the secret cache under that back seat of the Concord.

The thing Catlin had done had been entirely mechanical. Day in and day out, it had been a part of the day's beginning.

Last night, there in his sleeping quarters, the man called Jorg, the tall man, had returned his poke—and his watch. This morning, as he finished dressing, he had unthinkingly slipped the watch into his vest pocket, threaded the bar of the chain into its customary buttonhole.

The looping chain and that gold nugget charm dangled in plain view now, damning evidence—a crying witness to the fact that this watch and chain had been returned to him by some member of the outlaw gang.

That watch charm and those gold links chained him as certainly as iron shackles to a relentless pillar of guilt from which there was no escape but death. . . .

Out of the moment of stunned silence that followed Shad Smith's flung warning, a gunsmoke storm exploded.

One of the renegades, a square-built man, grabbed frantically for his six-shooter. Shad's finger took the trigger home, and the outlaw, his Colt swinging, grunted under the impact of the sledging missile from the Henry and wilted down.

A gaunt-bodied man with a hatchet-face cleared his .45 and drove a bullet at Shad, but the telegrapher was moving away, and the slug only battled a shower of splinters from the doorpost.

The tall bandit managed a hurried shot, but he was caught in a boil of milling horses and failed to get on his target, the hard-eyed youth with the Henry. What had gone wrong he couldn't know, but he knew the jig was up, and that it was fight out or die.



JUD RAWLINS' Navy Colt blared, and a horse went down screaming. The gaunt, hatchet-faced outlaw grabbed for a saddlehorn and flung himself up, wanting only to get away. At that moment the barn boy, a gangling, freckled youth, came from somewhere with an old .45-110 Sharps, and let go.

The bandit's horse crashed, spilling the gaunt-bodied man in a mad whirlpool of hoofs and boiling dust.

A third member of the stage pirates fired wildly, and then flung around, hunting cover, but he was caught by the flashing tines of a hay-fork in the hands of the

stock tender. A bolting horse knocked the outlaw down, breaking the handle off short and leaving the fork in his ribs.

The tall man almost made the saddle, but his maddened horse tore the pommel from his grip. He went to hands and knees, tried to jerk erect, but never quite made it, for at that instant the jolting Colt in the hand of Jud Rawlins toppled him over life's uncertain brink.

Catlin, the man of calm and poise, turned into a snarling devil. He wrenched at his six-shooter, and at the same moment set the fingers of his left hand into the coat of Ellis like savage talons, pulling this terrified individual against him as a human barricade.

"Get back!" snarled Catlin. Shad was almost on top of him. "Keep away from me, or I'll blow a hole in this pot-bellied ape!" His hot eyes hit at the stock tender. "Catch me one of those horses! Quick, you fool! The rest of you throw down your guns!"

"He'll kill me!" screamed Ellis.

Jud Rawlins hesitated, then he said, "All right, Catlin." And he flung aside his six-shooter.

Catlin's fury-distorted face swung to Shad. "You're always lookin' for a fight. I'll give it to you!"

"You're good when it comes to 'bushin' a man in the dark," Shad said fiercely, "but you're too yeller to shoot it out in a tight."

"Do what he tells you!" Ellis panted. "I don't want to die like this!"

Shad Smith was standing on wide-spraddled feet not two full paces from Ellis and Catlin. His brain was working fast.

He looked at Ellis, scowling. "You said last night that you figured I had somethin' to do with tippin' off them outlaws about the gold. Just for that I'm goin' to bat you one!"

Shad swung the heavy octagonal barrel of the Henry at the head of the paunchy Ellis. The other did the one thing that instinct prompted. Uttering a choked cry, he hurled himself to one side.

Shad knew what to expect and braced to check the swing of the rifle. Catlin, too late, saw the ruse. He had been jerked partly off balance, but he caught himself and swung his Colt, the hammer back.

The two guns raised their voices over Canyon Gate, bringing echoes back from the hills. A bullet snatched at Shad's vest, while behind him a round hole winked into being in a brown 'dobe wall.

Catlin took the Henry's battering .44 slug dead center. The sleek-dressed man with the burnsidies swayed, his Colt oozed from his fingers, and then there was the thud of his body hitting into the dust.



LARRY McLANE told of the part he had played, told it a little shakily but without reserve, just as he had planned to the night before.

"I got acquainted with Catlin the first week I was here," McLane said. "I was homesick, and said I was going back East as soon as I got the money. He offered to pay me if I could deliver certain messages to a man named McCollum, who would come to Canyon Gate.

"These messages were to be in code, for Catlin said he didn't want operators along the line knowing his business. I was just to repeat them to McCollum. Catlin said he'd understand. I suspected at last that the messages had something to do with the holdups that had been taking place at Bandit Bend, and I got scared. After the last one came, I told McCollum I was getting out.

"He said, 'One more clutch, kid, an' we'll all get out.' Yesterday I told Catlin I knew what was going on, and he laughed at me. Said I was in it up to my neck. When I said I'd had words with Shad here, he urged me to kill him, because he said Shad was too big for his boots and liable to make trouble."

"Then he tried to kill us both," Shad put in. "He was the bushwhacker last night."

"Reckon Catlin figgered McLane was the weak link," said Jud Rawlins, "an' wanted to be rid of him."

"I've had my lesson," McLane told them, "and if I get out of this scrape, I'm going to stick it out right here at Canyon Gate, and try and make something of myself."

Betty McLane's eyes were shining stars. "You are like those other men, Shad Smith!" she cried. "The fighting men who have blazed a trail across the West for the weaker ones to follow. I don't think I'll ever be afraid again, not of Paiutes or anything—knowing that you and your kind are on guard."

The gold was found in the saddlebags of the outlaws. Marston and Ellis, back on the east-bound passenger list, couldn't find words to express their gratitude. They talked of a reward for Shad, but he would have none of it.

"I've got a job," he told them, "an' I get paid for doin' it. But Charlie Rand's wife ain't, an' she's got nobody to work for her now. She can use the money."

Shad telegraphed the sheriff at Austin, and then Larry McLane took over. Jud Rawlins said he reckoned the law would overlook the tenderfoot's part in the affair, and that telegraphers were hard to get.

When the stage pulled out for Austin, Shad Smith went through as the gun rider, taking Charlie Rand's place.

On his way back to Carson City, Shad stopped over at Canyon Gate a couple of days. Larry McLane was still working the key there, and would continue to do so. The sheriff had given him a clean bill of health.

Two days. Not long, but when two red-blooded young folks settle their minds to love, a lot can happen. They said they would be married in the fall—Shad Smith and Betty McLane. And the next time Chicken Bill brought in the stage, they told him about it.

"Haw!" cackled the grizzled man who handled the six-whip. "Two more youngs coons a-lookin' fer a holler tree."

THE END

A Note to Hitler:

Every payday our dimes and dollars are buying the bonds to pay for the bombs that will blast you gangsters off the earth!

A HUNDRED MILLION AMERICANS



He was just a tramp kid. His clothes were ragged and patched. But he rode a beautiful horse that two men and a woman wanted—and would cheat and kill to get!

There was only the blur of the kid's hand, and the single bark of one shot.



THE MAKING OF THE TONDO KID

By Thomas Calvert McClary

THE boy was long and lanky and just about half starved. He rode into Winkelman in just about the most patched up clothes the town had ever seen. He used a frayed hackamore for a bridle, and his saddle was little better than some pieces of wood and leather held together with string.

But his horse was about the most beautiful thing the town had ever seen. It

was a pure palomino, seventeen hands high. It had a small quick head and powerful chest, and it stepped with the daintiness of a kitten through the thick sulphur-colored dust of the street.

Buck Brand saw the boy was pure green. With his cruel humor, he thought this was a chance to show off before the town. In a loud voice, he said in front of Marshal Stall, "Damned if that don't

look like the hoss Steve Weatherill said was stole from his north range!"

This was just as the kid passed Speed Hame's Last Buck honkatonk. Speed was standing at the bar with Belle Black, silent over their morning coffee. Speed saw the crowd and then the kid go past, and for a cool cutthroat gambler, lost his senses completely. He swallowed the dead stump of his cigar. Without even noticing that, he said thickly, "That's somethin' I got to have!" and flung like a drunken cowhand out the door.

The town had already hemmed the boy in. The crowd was thicker and more excited than it had ever been for any fight. It was solid like a wall, and Speed had to dig his way through. When he got to the center he saw Buck Brand swaggering before the crowd, and that fool Stall was trying to pin the boy for horse stealing.

The kid was scared, not of the men, but of what they thought, and he looked around wide eyed at the crowd. But there was iron in him too. He said stubbornly, "It's my hoss! I brung her up from a colt!"

"That so?" the marshal asked with sceptical importance. "How come h'its got no brand?"

"Brand?" the kid repeated unbelievably. "Why mister, you wouldn't brand a purty thing like this would you?"

That touched something in the crowd. It touched something in men who would have branded their own grandmothers even. The crowd began to call out. And the tide of raw, sharp humor turned back upon Buck Brand, making him look like a fool. Brand's face darkened, and a vicious twist passed across his mouth.

Watching from the stoop of the honkatonk, the woman said to Jake, the bartender, "Buck won't forget this fast. That boy better watch his step!"

"He's only a kid," Jake said.

Belle gave a metallic laugh. "Male or female, that don't matter to men like Buck!"

Speed Hame was booming out, "What-sa matter with you, marshal? Leave the kid alone. I'll see he gets along all right!" The marshal was glad to find an out.

Hame was big and rangy, and slick as they come. He had a red temper and

a black pride, and the lust of possession was in his eye. He said big brotherly, "Put him through his paces, kid!"

The crowd opened to make room, and the boy took the horse in hand. Now, with his attention on that beautiful animal, the scare and inexperience dropped from him. He became part of the rhythm of the horse.

He took the horse down the street in an easy jog, and came back snaking the horse in swift zigzag cuts. Watching him, the crowd knew why he didn't need more than a frayed hackamore for a bridle. He didn't use the horse's mouth or head at all. He gave a bare pressure with his knees, and that was enough.

He made a circle and a figure eight with scarcely more than a whispered word. He paced off a delayed step that would fret up even good horses that could do it. He took the horse downstreet in a hand canter, and then bent over into a full gallop—and that Waterloo of many a good horse, the sudden stop. He backed the horse, and reared it, and made it kneel, and all this with nothing more than a nudge or a softly whispered word.

Speed watched this with a horseman's eye, his dark face setting with a hard jealousy and a challenge to others in the crowd who wanted that horse.

Right then, one of them called out, "Kid, you want to auction that hoss right here and now?"

That would be Ben Gately calling, and Speed wheeled on him with vicious anger. "What ya crowdin' the boy for, Ben?"

Ben pushed through, a square built man with a face square in more ways than one. He said point blank, "So the lad don't get taken for his greenness, Speed!"

Speed said slowly, "Ya got a funny way of mindin' other people's business, Ben!"

"Right out in the open," Ben answered inflexibly. "Not in some back room!"

The men stared at each other with narrowed eyes and thin lips. They were building for a fight.

The kid felt the tenseness, and he gulped awkwardly, "Looka here, folks, this hoss ain't for sale! Not at no price!"

The stiffness went out of Speed, and he turned to the kid with a smooth grin. "Now that you've made that clear, kid,

you need some vittles! Put yore hoss up at the Trail Stables and drift around to the Last Buck."

The kid purpled clean down his neck. He muttered, "I didn't figure to stable Lady, mister."

Speed chuckled. "You figure again! I own 'em both. If you got feelings about it, you can work the charges off."

The kid looked grateful and pushed the horse through the grinning crowd. He put his horse up, and came into the Last Buck gawking around at the mirrors, and gleaming bar, and the gaudy gold and red paint as if he'd come face to face with a dream. Speed called him over to the table where he sat with two of his gunmen and Belle Black, and told him to order what he wanted.

The kid looked at Belle's dark beauty, and stared at her with such wonderment that she asked in her husky tones:

"Don't I stack up pretty as your horse, kid?"

"Oh, m'am!" he blurted. "Yore jist about the purtiest thing I ever seen!"

Speed grinned and said, "Damned if I ain't got to watch this rival!" and his laughter boomed in the room.



THE boy turned a violent purple and sat self consciously on the edge of his chair. When the waiter asked him what he'd have, he gulped, "Well, if it's all right with Mr. Speed, I'll have me some good chili beans."

"Beans?" Speed echoed, and cursed beneath his breath. He said to the waiter, "Get him the biggest beefsteak in town with all the fixin's, and one of Ma Bressner's big apricot pies!"

The kid looked hard at the table, and his ears were scarlet, and he murmured, "That's an awful lot of money, Mr. Speed! Be thirty, forty cents, won't it?"

It would be about two dollars and a half, and Speed looked at him sharply to see if he was ribbing. The kid wasn't. He just didn't know. He was worse than green. He hadn't sprung a spring shoot yet! Speed thought of the horse and smiled slowly to himself. He winked at the two men. Then he spoke to the kid.

"Where you from and whataya do?"

"Ride herd for old man Castro over the Tondo hills," the kid told him.

"Belle, meet my new rival, the *Tondo Kid*!" Speed grinned. "What's he pay you, fella?"

"Four dollars a month, when he's workin' me," the kid said.

"Four bucks and grub! Christmas!" Speed muttered.

"Oh, I got to pay my own grub," the kid told him. "See, it don't leave much for savin'. That's how come I rode over here." His boyish brow wrinkled up with concentration. "I figured mebbe I could get steadier work and better wages, and if I was real careful like, I could save me fifty dollars in mebbe two years, and buy a palomino stallion, and start my own string."

"For fifty bucks?" Speed asked incredulously. You could buy horses for ten dollars, but you couldn't buy the kind of horseflesh the kid rode for five hundred! "How much you figure yore mare's worth?"

"Oh, I know a mare ain't wuth as much," the kid said. "But she's a good hoss. I reckon I could get thirty-five, forty dollars if I held on long enough."

Speed swallowed hard. He thought, "Why don't they come like this oftener?" He leaned across the table and said, "Kid, I like a boy like you, and I'm the kind that will do something for folks I like! Suppose I give you a brand new outfit, spurs to bridle, and any mare and stallion you want to pick on this range, and fifty dollars to boot for yore mare?"

The kid's eye popped. He couldn't believe the offer. He stared at the table, and when he looked up, his eyes were full of bewilderment and misery. He said, "Gee, Mr. Speed, you been awful nice to me. But I jist couldn't sell Lady for any price! See I don't have no family, and she's just about all I got!"

Speed looked crossed, but Belle gave him a look that shut him up. Sometimes he wondered why she had ever bothered to hook up with a man. She had more brains than most, and she was the fastest thing in that country with a gun. She turned to the boy meaning to put on the heat. But she looked into his young blue eyes. There was something infinitely clean and decent in those eyes, and it got

under her skin. She asked, "How'd you get this horse, kid?"

"Found him in a blizzard," he said. "Old man Castro tried to say it was his. But it was on open range, and just after he'd fired me for the winter. The sheriff said it was mine."

A hard and stubborn spark came into his eyes, and the line of his jaw set with unsuspected steel. "I toted that colt fourteen miles, and brung her back from dead, and she was mine by rights! I reckon I'da fit for that colt, need be!"

The men grinned. The waiter brought the steak and trimmings, and the kid went after it like he'd never eaten in his life. Speed eyed the two men, and they went out on business. The woman sat there watching the kid eat, and stirred by sharp feelings that went back an incredibly long eight years.

She knew that Buck had come into the bar and was stewing in resentment, and she knew that in time, there was nothing Speed wouldn't do to get that horse. She waited until the kid finished his second cup of coffee and loosened his belt, and gave her an appreciative grin. Then she leaned across the table, putting a beautiful soft hand on his, and her fingers were filled with surprising strength.

She said urgently, "Kid, I'll give you the fifty dollars, but you take it and get out of town!"

He looked at her with grave wonder. "Gee, Miss Belle, I dunno why you folks should be so nice! But I couldn't take money from a woman! No m'am, I got to stay and find work somehow."

Belle's teeth were suddenly pearl white upon her lower lip. A pin's thickness of blood stained along the edges. The kid saw this and he couldn't understand. He worried that maybe he'd hurt her feelings.

He slept out in the stables and he kept clamoring for a job to even things up. Speed promised him one to keep him from getting another in the town. But he kept putting him off, trying by a dozen means to drive a bargain. He'd ridden the horse, and its swift daintiness was something that cantered through his dreams. There had never been another horse like it on that range. The man who owned it would be famous to the Rio Grande.

He thought that to own that horse he would pay a thousand dollars or commit murder. But the kid wouldn't sell at any price, and there were too many people interested in that horse to get away with murder. He tried to get the kid drunk to make him sign a paper. But the kid got sick and passed out instead. He tried to get him into games of cards. The kid wouldn't gamble.

"For a kid," Speed snapped rawly at Belle one night, "he's stubborn as a mule!"

She laughed at him and he flung out of the room to get drunk.

Then he found the kid couldn't read numbers. That offered him the chance. He kept telling the kid his dinners were fifteen cents, and got him to sign the checks at two and three bucks a crack. He had to teach the kid how to sign his name at that, and proud of his new achievement, the kid ate twice as often, just for the pleasure of this important act.

"You'll never get away with that!" Belle warned Speed one day. "Everybody in town knows the kid's been waiting on a job from you!"

The town was also riding the daylights out of Speed that he couldn't even talk a kid out of a horse. And now filled with temper he jutted out his head and snarled, "All right, yore so smart! *You* take him over!"

She thought silently that she wouldn't take this kid over in a million years. But if she could get him alone to talk to, maybe she could figure out something that would work for them both. She had always wanted to know how to train a horse, and now she got the kid to teach her.



THEY rode out to the blue-hazed range daily, just as the heat would be lifting from the land. When it came to horseflesh, the kid was a full grown man. He wasn't so terribly young at that. Seventeen, he said. It was just that he was too decent and upright to know a lot of slimy things. He taught her to be one with the horse, and then in a week, he had her training her own pony

to do tricks the smoothest outlaws didn't know. Tricks such as going from mid-canter into a full back kick that would unseat any rider coming on behind.

He lost his bashfulness with her, and after they had worked the horses, they would sit under a big cherry to watch the sunset sky while they cooled. They were sitting there this evening, close and in a casual way. He could feel the warmth and the full-blooded feminineness of her bombarding him in waves. He turned awkwardly, uncertain of what to do to relieve the tension. But there was the answer in her eyes, and the rapid rise and fall of her deep, shapely breasts. They drew together without will, and the press of her firm body was like a sudden fever in him.

Then Belle felt a spark of resistance in him—and wise about men, she detached herself and drew away with dark and gentle questions in her eyes.

He was white, and ashamed she'd felt this thing in him, and he said apologetically, "See, it jist wouldn't be right, would it?"

"I don't know," she answered softly. "What is it, kid?"

He couldn't look at her without those feverish things shooting through his blood. So he turned and put his elbows on his knees, and sat talking down at his hands. He said with an awkward seriousness, "You see, Mr. Speed don't know why I couldn't sell this horse. It's on account of the girl, Miss Belle."

"Ah!" she breathed with tender memories. "You want to have the best horse and the best blooded string on the range?"

"Yes," he said desperately. "I got to! See this other fella is older, and all slick and smart and got money. And he's a good hand with a gun. He's kinda like Mr. Speed. He wants her to ride away with him. You know, thisaway, I ain't got anything to offer, and I can see her feelings."

"Suppose you got your string started, kid?" Belle asked.

"That'd be different, then. She'd wait! I know she would, Miss Belle! See, she loves horses too, and she thinks a heap of me. All she wants is to be sure that she ain't goin' to have to sit out there in that dry Tondo country and live on beans

and rattle snake, the way some women do." He made a boy's gesture of understanding. "I can't blame her any!"

She studied the way the wild hair curled at the nape of his neck, and she thought of another boy like this she had known when she was very young. There had been a second man, like the one he had just described, and there had been the problem of money too. And after an argument about money, she had gone out with that handsome, reckless stranger one night—and that was the reason she was now at the Last Buck.

She put a hand upon his shoulder and she said gently, "A man needs a little decent gentleness in him, kid, but to buck this country, he needs some hardness too."

"I got it in me!" the kid told her. "When I'm in the right!"

She thought of what happened to what men thought was right, hanging around a town like this. She thought of Buck Brand, and of Speed and other men who'd always be after the kid's horse. For an instant, her thoughts flew ahead into the years, and she could see all of those wicked and evil men that no man living in the West could help but run against some day.

"When you're *right*! That's a word few men in this country know the meaning of!" she said. "But I think you do. Kid, can you use a gun?"

"No," he said, "I never had me the money to buy one."

She gave his shoulder a solid squeeze. "That's where I come in, Tondo Kid, and you and me get even! I'm going to loan you a gun, and I'm going to teach you to shoot as no man except Hickok can do in this whole West!"

"Gee! Wild Bill Hickok!" the kid breathed with glowing eyes. "Do you really think you could?"

"I ought to. He taught me all he knew!" she said. "But by then it was too late for me. It won't be for you, kid. But this is between you and me."

Every day for a month, they went out horse training and pistol shooting on the range. And in that space she had taught him all she knew. He could draw faster even than her card-trained eyes could follow. He could shoot through his hol-

ster, if need be, faster than most men could reach their gun. He could roll across the ground and hit six pebbles in a row at twenty paces, without pausing in his roll. He was as good with a gun as with a horse. On the day she was sure of this she said, "Kid, I've taught you all I know! Don't ever give the bad ones a break, and you'll be a good man and a big man in the West some day."

He looked down at the gun strangely, and murmured with a deep seriousness, "I reckon some day I'll have to use this on a man."

"You'll never have to use it on a *good* man, kid!" she said. "The good ones won't call you to. And with the bad ones, just look at their eyes like they were pebbles!"



THEY rode back into town through orange-shot purple shadows. The lights slashed out smoky yellow sheets into the night as they passed the bars. The kid put up the horses and came around to the Last Buck. The saloon was already roaring with night trade. Speed and Buck Brand were standing together down the bar, both of them licked up, and grinning with some trickery they'd hatched. The marshal was there, and the three of them watched the kid come in.

Buck barked across at him, "Well there, Tondo Kid, did you bring in my new hoss safe and sound?"

"What hoss?" the kid asked, not understanding.

"Why the hoss named *Lady*, the palomino that used to be yore's!"

There was danger behind the raillery of Buck's tones. The kid sensed this without seeing just how he could be on the spot. He spoke in a stubborn, level voice. "That hoss ain't yore's, Buck Brand, and never will be!"

Buck's face went ugly at the cross, but the bar had gone quiet to listen to this, and he had to play out the piece. He jerked his head at the marshal and grunted, "What d'you say, marshal?"

The marshal was thumbing through a stack of checks, and now he said, "Well, that's the way it looks, kid, unless you

can pay these checks off. You owe the money, and this man's got a right to attach yore property for debt!"

"They ain't his checks!" the kid bridled. "Mr. Speed done paid for those, and we're goin' to square up when he gives me a job!"

Speed said sadly, "Kid, I got some bad news for you. I done lost those checks, just like money, to Buck in a poker game. And I ain't got that much money to loan you to pay up."

The kid's face went scarlet. He growled, "I don't aim to borrow to pay off my debts! I got six dollars cached away, and I'll pay them checks now!"

The marshal glanced at the last check. He said, "That ain't quite enough, kid. These total up one hundred and fifty-three dollars." He held the bunch of checks out and flipped slowly through them. "These all yore signature, ain't they?"

The kid's mind was in a haze. He'd been tricked by a man he trusted, and the shock of it was a thick mist that left him numb and speechless. Through this haze he heard the marshal asking him again. He saw the twisted grins on those two faces, and in that instant, knew just how this had happened. But all that he could do was nod.

"Ain't nothing to stop me from takin' that horse, is there?" he heard Buck growl.

"Nothin' I know of," the marshal said.

The kid felt ashamed and frightened and bewildered, all at once. The utter disillusion of this trickery froze his muscles and turned his blood to water. Pitifully as a boy looking for his mother, he turned his eyes up to the balcony above the room.

Belle was there, leaning on the railing. The fury of her face changed into the softest and proudest and most believing expression the boy had ever seen. Leaning there with the bright yellow light falling across her dark beauty, she smiled down at the kid, and sent him the message of every confidence a woman who knew men could ever feel.

That message was like a strengthening voice coming through all that smoke-filled, dizzy haze. It gave him courage and his senses sharpened. He was scared,

but the knowledge of being right was in him, and he gave her a tight-lipped smile. She nodded, once, and he saw the path of golden light rippled across her sable hair, and then he saw that she was tossing two pebbles and catching them again.

He turned and he called out to Buck, "You don't get that horse, Buck!"

Buck wheeled, and there was cruel contempt in his ugly eyes. He roared, "Ya heard the marshal. There ain't nothing to stop me taking it!"

"I got something to stop you," the kid said through pale, drawn lips. "A gun!"

Buck's face went a solid purple, and then evil lights flamed up in his eyes. His lips pulled back in a vicious snarl. He was a killer, and the love of killing was on his face. He grated out, "Ya asked for this, kid!" and his hand went for his gun.

There was only a blur of the kid's hand, and the single bark of one shot smashing down the room. Brand's knees buckled, his head jerked back, and he crashed down on the floor. There was an amazed silence, and through it came Ben Gately's honest voice, "Smack between the eyes! Did you see that kid draw?"

The kid was shaking, and dead white. But within him was welling up a fact: this was the language of the trail, and when a boy reached manhood, this was the language that he used when he was right and put upon!

Gately was saying with immense respect, "Lad, you did a public service!"

Belle had moved down the stairs and come up behind Speed, and now she put a hand upon his arm. She murmured low in his ear, "Buck had a thousand dollars in your safe, Speed. Give it to the kid, and let him dust off!"

"You crazy?" Speed snarled.

"You never did a decent deed in your life!" she said. "Do it now. Every man-

jack in here will cheer you forever!"

Speed scowled. He liked to be cheered, but a thousand dollars—

"Beside," she purred into his ear. "That's a mighty dangerous way that kid used that gun!"

Speed looked suddenly sharp eyed, and recollected his own part in this. The kid was slowly turning toward him, which brought the quickest sweat to his brow he had ever known. He jumped up on the bar and hollered, "Men, you all know what kind of an hombre Buck Brand was, and it's a damned good thing he's gone! He leaves no kin, but he left a thousand dollars in my safe. I say what could be better than to give it to the boy he tried to hornswoggle? Maybe it will be put down on the books as Buck's one good deed when he comes up before the devil!"

The cheers were instant and uproarious. They cheered the kid. They cheered Speed. They even cheered Buck Brand!

The whole town spilled out upon the street to cheer the kid along his way. He rode differently now than when he'd ridden into town. There was an assurance to him he had not had, and a man's set to his shoulders. The boys were still whooping and hollering as he rode off into the moonlight, and Speed did something he had never done before. Standing there beside Belle, he put a fond arm around her shoulders. He gave his head a shake of satisfaction. He said, "Belle, I've been the makings of the Tondo Kid! He'll be a big man in this country soon!"

She leaned her head against his shoulder with a curiously poignant smile. She thought of that girl back there at Tondo, and that other man "*like Speed*." A man thought a long time before he ran out with the girl of one who could shoot like the Tondo Kid! And that thousand dollars would be enough to start his string.



Kirby had to get away quick then, without thinking about water or grub.



BOOTHILL BONANZA

By Gunnison Steele

How could old Kirby Shane, robbed of his food and water in the middle of the arid wasteland, and gun-whipped unconscious, call on his friend the desert—to bring a cold-blooded killer to the merciless justice he deserved?

THERE was the desert, vast and merciless, with fierce heat boiling up from its dunes and stony spires and beating down from the brassy sky above. There was old Kirby Shane, shuffling along beside his long-eared burro, headed for the outside with samples that he hoped would make him rich. And there was Lash Krugar, who had robbed a bank and killed a man in Skytooth, spurring his weary mount deeper into the wastelands. . . .

When Krugar saw Kirby Shane plodding along beside his burro, looking almost like a scarecrow in his floppy hat and his faded, ragged garments, a cunning

light leaped into his black eyes. He didn't know that Kirby Shane had sighted him some moments before.

They drew to a halt a few yards apart, shading their eyes against the fierce sun-glare, staring calculatingly at each other. Krugar quickly saw that the patriarchal oldster wore no gun. And Kirby saw that the big, dark-faced rider had a canteen but no pack.

"Howdy, mister," Kirby said. "You lost or somethin'? The way you're headed, it's a fur piece to water."

Ignoring the question, Krugar countered, "You got any water, old man?"

"Yeah, I got some water."

Krugar's gaze swung to the shaggy burro. Besides a light pack, the burro was weighted with four heavy water bags. Krugar swung eagerly to the ground.

"I'll get you a drink," Kirby said quickly. Taking one of the bags, which was more than half empty, he handed it to Krugar.

Lash Krugar drank noisily and greedily. He lowered the water bag, wiping his lips on a dirty sleeve, and looked at the other bags.

"Where'd you get all that water?"

Kirby gestured vaguely. "Out there. But you'd never find it. What're you doin' out in the desert without water?"

"That's my business. What're you doin' here?"

"Prospectin'," Kirby said truthfully.

"Looks like I mighta found somethin', too. I'm headed outside now with some samples to be assayed."

"Samples?" Krugar's eyes narrowed. "Where are they?"

Kirby Shane shifted uneasily, said, "Looks like you're in a hurry, stranger. And if you're outa water, you can fill your canteen from one of these bags."

"I aim to take all that water!" Krugar said.

Kirby looked blankly at the long-barreled sixgun that had appeared suddenly in the big man's hand. "That wouldn't be right," he protested mildly. "I'll need some—"

"I need it worse'n you do. Listen to me, you old goat, and mebbly you'll live longer. I've got men on my trail. I stuck up a bank back yonder, and killed a man when he grabbed for a gun. I had to get away quick then, without thinking about water or grub. Bounty hunters hemmed me in, and forced me out here into this hellish desert. I've got a good lead, but they're back there, mebbly half a day behind. They know I don't have any grub or water, and they figure on comin' up with me after I drop."

"They would have, too, if I hadn't met up with you. Now they'll never catch me. That water you've got there'll get me across this desert. You got any grub?"

"A little," old Kirby agreed. "Reckon I can make it on to Skytooth without grub or water. I'll get it for you." He

moved toward the burro, which stood with drooping head in the blazing heat.

"Get back from there!" Krugar snarled. "You seem damn anxious to get to that pack. Mebbly you got a gun cached there, huh? And I'm not forgettin' about them gold samples. I'll have a look-see."

Keeping the gun muzzle trained on old Kirby, Krugar went to the burro. He started rummaging in the pack. Puzzlement flicked at his evil face. One after the other, he lifted the four water bags and sloshed them.

He frowned, looked at the old prospector.

"Where're them samples?" he demanded.

Kirby said calmly, "Find 'em if you want 'em. I ain't sayin'."

Krugar swore savagely. "Mebby you want to die, like that old coot back there in the Skytooth bank did. He looked kinda surprised when I shot him in the belly."

Kirby Shane got very still, and there was a stunned light in his pale eyes. "Not ol' Jeb Tolley! A fat, bald-headed little gent?"

Krugar nodded, grinned. "It was funny, the way his toes curled up."

"Jeb was the best friend I ever had," Kirby said huskily. "For thu'ty years we was sidekicks, roamin' the deserts and mountains, up till Jeb took to bankin'. It was him that'd grubstaked me all these years, givin' me a chance to strike it rich. Now, just when I'd mebbly found somethin', when I could mebbly pay Jeb back—you kill him. If I had a gun I'd kill you. But you'll pay, mister! The desert'll make you pay for killin' old Jeb!"

Krugar jiggled the gun muzzle. "Don't try to change the subject. Where're them samples?"

"Find 'em, if you want 'em!"

Krugar cursed harshly. He cuffed the old man with his open hand, threatened to kill him. Kirby said nothing, didn't resist—just stood there, calm-eyed, and looked at the raging killer.

Finally, baffled, Krugar gave up. "I think it was all a lie, anyway," he growled. "You didn't have any gold. You're tryin' to kill time, hopin' them bounty hunters'll come up with me. But I got a good lead

and I'm ridin' on now. While I'm shiftin' this grub to my bronc, you pour the water out of two of them bags."

"What's the idea of that?"

"Two bags is all I'll need. And I'm not leavin' any water here for you to turn over to them law-dogs when they come along. They'll likely be short on water, and when they find out I've got plenty they'll turn back. Jump, blast you!"



SILENTLY, Kirby took the four water bags from the burro. From the partly empty bag, and one of the full ones, he poured the precious liquid out onto the parched sand. The other two full bags Krugar hooked to his saddlehorn.

Krugar swung into the saddle, grinned down at Kirby Shane. Kirby seemed resigned to losing his water and food. He looked up at the renegade with bleak, expressionless eyes.

"You're gettin' off light," Krugar declared. "You just wait here, and them bounty hunters'll be along. I've beaten them and I'll beat the desert."

Kirby said softly, "You can't fight the desert with guns."

"Meanin' what?"

"You'll find out. Sometimes the desert plays queer pranks on them she don't like. She likes her little joke now and then."

"Mebby she'll like this one, then!" Krugar sneered, and suddenly jabbed spurs to his horse.

As the startled beast lunged forward,

Krugar swiped down in a short, choppy blow with the clubbed gun. Kirby twisted desperately aside. But the gun barrel caught him a glancing blow on the side of the head, smashed him to the hot earth. A purple mist roared through his brain. . . .

When Kirby regained consciousness the red sun was almost touching the desert rim, and half a dozen gun-belted men stood about him. They were led by Sheriff Sam Talbot of Skytooth.

"I see you met up with Lash Krugar," Talbot said grimly.

Kirby Shane sat up, shaking his grizzled head to clear it. Briefly he explained what had happened.

"So he took your water?" The sheriff shook his head bitterly. "I was countin' on thirst stoppin' him or turnin' him back. He out-foxed us, and now we wouldn't have a chance of catchin' him. We'll have to turn back. And your samples—you say he got them, too?"

Kirby nodded dejectedly. "He didn't know it, but he did. They was in the water bags he took."

Sheriff Talbot grinned with slow understanding. "You mean you had the gold in the water bags—and Krugar was fool enough not to examine them and make sure they held water?"

"Gold?" Kirby Shane looked puzzledly at the grinning possemens. "Who said anything about gold? It was water in them bags, all right. Borax water, strong as lye. Samples I was bringin' out from my discovery to have assayed. Krugar made me pour out the good water. He won't get far on what he took!"



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THAT MORE AND BIGGER AERIAL
BLOWS MAY BE STRUCK AT OUR
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KING OF THE RANGE

By Tom Roan



A gun stabbed the shadows with its licking flame of fire.

Southward out of the Dakota Bad Lands, a regal black stallion led his wild, free horse herd to winter pasturage. Then an army of two-legged invaders, cowards who fought from the rims of unscalable cliffs, sprang a mustang trap—from which the only escape was death!

HE WAS coming like the devil tearing the mountains down when the terrifying crash of gunfire broke on the herd from the high rims of that Bad Lands Canyon. It was a withering fire. A dozen mares and colts were caught in the first volley. Some went down, dropped dead in their tracks, some bawled in terror and pain as they tried to keep to their feet and follow Black Eagle on through. Some foolishly wheeled, pawing the air, and tried to turn back; the next volley thundered lead

into them as if the night sky had suddenly opened up in a crashing storm of deadly lightning.

Only half of the wild herd got through. Some of those that made it could not keep up with the flying pace of Black Eagle and the equally fast old gray mare at his side. Bullets were terrible things. They tore through a horse's flanks, ribs and shoulders, shattering bones and muscles, and buried themselves deep with a pain that sawed back and forth like a red-hot strand of barbwire. Most of those that

were hit and kept going were due to drop within a mile. Others stopped slowly, stood with feet wide-braced, legs stiff, each at the end of his trail—death dulling their eyes as they waited for the end.

Unknown to Black Eagle and the rest of the herd, there was a war on somewhere between the two-legged creatures who called themselves civilized animals, and the price of horse hide had jumped sky-high. It was natural, of course, for the hunters to come, armed with every kind of firearm from high-powered modern rifles to old-fashioned buffalo guns that drove as much as 550 grains of tin and lead into a horse.

Also, it was the second time within twenty-four hours that Black Eagle and the wall-eyed gray mare had led the herd into disaster. For five years the stallion and the wise old mare had bossed the herd. Always before they had managed to lead the herd to safety, with only a small loss, when hunters fell upon it. It had been a large herd in the beginning, and it had grown steadily under the leadership of the mare and the stallion.

There had been more than a hundred and seventy head of wild horses in it twenty-four hours before this last attack. The first slaughtering had wiped out more than fifty, and it had been even more deadly here. Animals had gone down back there in massed groups of struggling, pain-drunk shapes. It had been like a powerful wind swooping across a field of ripe grain and blowing down swaths of straw.

Black Eagle and the mare were heading southward, whipping along all that was left of the herd. The horse and the mare knew every mile of the country. When the fall winds blew Black Eagle always led the herd southward, and he brought it north again in the spring. No horse had a keener nose for water and grass when the herd was on the move, and the gray mare outmatched all others when it came to slyness. It was a long range, stretching from the Bad Lands of the Dakotas to the wild, mountain-locked wilderness of hills and mile-deep valleys along the San Juan River below the Utes of southeastern Utah. The mare would sneak the herd around towns and

settlements to keep out of sight of mankind, often running only at night and hiding during the day.

Black Eagle and the mare had been trying to quit the Bad Lands for almost a week. Fall was in the air, and the scent of man had come to them many times. It had been impossible to shake that scent. Each time the stallion and mare had tried to drift the herd away from it they had encountered it stealing up from another direction.

Men could be very wise when they wanted to do something. This wholesale execution had been planned well. Riders had scattered in a great circle many miles across. Day after day the circle had been tightened, with the men slowly closing in. Keen eyes on high points—some of them made sharper with powerful telescopes—had kept track of the herd from miles away. The country had been studied and every known mile of it mapped out well in advance of the drive. Now that the drive was on, the men ahead knew exactly where to lie in wait for the kill while others brought up the rear, gradually squeezing in.

It was only by the luck of the gods that Black Eagle and the old mare were getting away at all. A concerted burst of fire had been directed at them. Hunters always tried to cut down the leaders. It was the first and most sensible way of making an attack. Once the leaders were down, the herd did not know which way to turn and run.

There was blood on Black Eagle, coming from three places where bullets had nicked him and clipped away long wisps of his mane. The old mare's right shoulder was streaked with a sticky red smear. She was limping before they had gone a second mile and was running with a crazy weaving like a drunken shuffle.

But there would be no halt now, not even for water. They pounded on, with the noise of flying hoofs a wicked, war-ringing drumming in the darkness. Something told the stallion that they had rammed through the worst of it. The men on the rims had probably waited a few seconds too long before opening fire. Otherwise, the terrible volleys might have turned the herd, sending it charging back so the men behind it would have their

chance to open fire on them again.

The mare kept with him for a long time, but her reeling, shambling gait was getting worse and worse. In the end she stumbled to a halt, sweat and blood pouring from her. Her sides were heaving like laboring bellows and her breath was coming in a deep, gulpy blowing.

Black Eagle whirled back to her angrily. With bared teeth he ran at her, giving her a nip on the rump to tell her she was not going to quit and drop out on him. But muscle, blood and bone could stand only so much. The mare had been hard hit. A heavy slug of lead had slithered down through her shoulder to a point deep inside her body. Blood was dripping from her nose when her feet and legs gave away. With a grunt she pitched over on her left side.



REFUSING to leave her, he was like a soldier on a battlefield trying to help a wounded comrade to his feet. Her head was still up. He nudged her with his nose, nipped her neck, nicked at her, and then whistled fiercely. She tried to touch him with her muzzle.

The rest of the herd was going crazy. It had stopped, milling about in a panic, some of the mares and colts nickering as if calling to him to come on and lead them out of there. He was standing with his muzzle close to the old mare's ear when her head reeled over, allowing her to sprawl at full length on the ground.

It was the end. Even a wild stallion knew that. He was in a fury now, as if suddenly possessed of a devil. Snorting and lunging, he split through the herd, knocking mares and colts out of his way, delivering swift kicks here and there as if he had grown to hate them all in the minute or two it had taken the old mare to stop, drop and die.

He struck out in the lead, alone now. He no longer had the gray mare and her cunning there to help him. In the past she had always seemed to know what was lurking beyond the distant hills, hiding on a rim or lying ready for ambush at some lonely water hole when the herd slipped down to drink.

With the mare dead and the remainder

of the wild herd behind him, he headed southward, but the wind-eroded cliffs kept pushing him eastward more and more. In that direction was open country, where a herd could be seen for miles. There were ranches out there, and ranches meant more men—and men meant guns or ropes.

Settling down to a steady pace that the colts could keep up with, it was nearly two hours before he caught the man scent again. When the mares and colts caught the odor, there was no panic, no nervous nickering, but their tension spread until the very air seemed charged with lightning.

The wind was fish-tailing now, and a weak little moon was rising like a drunken yellow eye in the sky. Black Eagle was watching warily, head up, eyes walling, nostrils quivering. He wanted to change his course. But the walls still shut them in, swinging up at every hand, eroded to all manner of fantastic shapes, blown full of wind holes. No horse could go up there. Only the birds could fly in and out of those places.

Gradually the herd slowed up. There was no pounding of hoofs now. Every animal was on the alert. It was like a herd of elephants moving without a sound through a jungle, with danger all around, the instinct of the wilds making them know they had to keep quiet or die.

Black Eagle led the way up a long sandy slope. In front of him now was that flat, wide open, dangerous ground. A thicket of dwarfed pines loomed seven hundred yards away. He headed for them like a thief seeking the shadows. The man smell did not seem so close to him now. A colt snorted somewhere behind him, making him back his ears with anger. The herd was crowding together back there.

The thicket was not far ahead when he sensed terror closing in on him. He heard the beat of shod hoofs. Behind him, like demons pouring out of the ground, riders were flinging up, two dark lines of them, and in a spreading V they were sweeping forward. Others were spurring up ahead, far out to the right and left, forming a great lane through which the herd was going to have to run.

A gun stabbed the shadows with its licking flame of fire. A colt bawled be-

hind Black Eagle. In a frenzied rush it came forward, forefeet fighting the air. It made one long, desperate jump, as if trying to throw itself right up at the stars. It never bawled again. Its legs bent under it while it was in the air. Down it came, rolling on the ground, the herd going wild again as it swept on over the colt, hoofs stumbling against the body, cutting into it.

Black Eagle whistled long and fiercely. Neck out, mane and tail flying, he was like some mad black devil splitting the wind as he whipped the herd on through the night in a last hopeless fight to take it to safety.

A low wall of hills lay ahead of him. There was a break in them that looked like it had been taken out by a gigantic bite. There would be a canyon in the mouth of that break, but it never entered his fiery head that he was leading the herd into another trap—where the men who were chasing them could take their time about the killing and skinning. . . .

* * *

It was a good catch, close to sixty-five head, Elbert Scobey reckoned when dawn came. A long, hump-backed figure in shabby gray, he looked as lean as a skeleton on a skeletal black horse as he sat there on a rise up-canyon and stared at the milling herd trapped by the high walls of the canyon in the distance. His eyes twinkled like two shining black buttons hiding far back in sunken sockets.

"Yes, sir," he nodded, "close-nigh to sixty-five. Maybe a mite more. Some good enough, I reckon, to be sold to the government on the hoof after we've killed out the rougher stuff. I ain't done bad."

He turned in his old saddle, gnawing off a chew of tobacco as he looked behind him. The man was not born, he reckoned, who could beat Elbert Scobey when it came to wiping out a wild herd.

For miles back horses lay dead on the ground. Skinners were already starting to work, and big wagons would soon move in to bring the hides out of the Bad Lands.

Wholesale killings always paid when Elbert Scobey moved in. Ranchers would lend cowboys for the drive, especially

gladly when some notorious black stallion was stealing mares off the range. Town folks, too, could be had by the score just for the fun of the hunt. Didn't cost a man anything for help like that. No one except Scobey's skinners and his bull cook ever looked for pay.

The longer he watched the milling band in the distance, the better Elbert Scobey liked the animals. It was natural that the pick of the crop should come through. The fastest and best usually did.

Below the rise where he sat his horse, the canyon narrowed like the neck of a bottle, then spread away in a walled circle with a water hole and grass in the distance. Three men were already cutting poles down there to pitch a stout fence across the narrow place.

It would take a couple of days of hard work to skin the dead animals and pick up the hides. Only one man would be left here to guard the fence. That would be just to make sure some cowboy did not come along and become sentimental looking at horses waiting to be shot. Scobey had known cowpunchers in the past who were fools enough to tear down a fence and let a herd go back to the wild. If any man tried it with the horses Elbert Scobey had trapped, he would get his belly full of hot lead!

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BLACK EAGLE charged down to the fence, time after time, only to come wheeling back. He was worn out, like the rest of the herd that had come through with him, but nervous energy kept him on the move all day. It was better when night settled and he fell to grazing nervously with the other horses, even with a little fire burning down near the fence and the odor of broiling flesh stealing through the air as the burly, evil-smelling guard cooked his supper.

The first to lose their nervousness were about twenty of the mares Black Eagle had tolled away from ranches in the past. Once in the herd they had grown as wild as the rest. But now, caught up again, knowing there was no escape, they accepted the inevitable.

But even the mares that had known the

feel of human hands were as crazy as the rest when the third day came and the killers moved in. It was slow, thoughtful slaughtering now. Keen-eyed men studied each animal. Sometimes they talked about it; sometimes they argued heatedly. It was the long, thin man on the tall black horse who had the final word. When he spoke the men either turned away, leaving the animal in question alone or their guns crashed out a terrible noise as they sat in their saddles—and the animal went down, quivering and kicking on the ground. The smell of blood in the air became a maddening thing, with buzzards circling overhead, and the colts and fillies going crazy at the sight of the growing number of skinless humps glaring in the sunlight.

The roundup on the fourth day was just as maddening. The narrow gash between the walls down-canyon had been converted into a corral. It was about ninety yards long. What was left of the herd was jammed into it, and another fence was thrown across its upper end. The men picked out and roped the animals that had once been tame. When rope was one on them their spirits wilted.

It was natural that Black Eagle would put up the worst fight when they finally came to him, but the men had expected that. He was left until the last, and the men came upon him as a gang, riding their best horses, their ropes ready. He went into them like a devil. He reared up on his hind feet, his fore hoofs smashing the air, teeth bared, mane and tail whipping. Like hissing snakes the ropes struck at him.

Within three minutes his fight was over and he lay choking on the ground. When they let him up he was tight-snubbed between two saddle horns with powerful roping horses holding him. . . .

Elbert Scobey cursed him as he had never cursed a horse while they fought with him for the twelve long miles to the little railroad town of Pride City. No less than twenty times Scobey had a notion to shove the muzzle of a Colt against the horse's mean head and blow his brains out. Never had he seen a brute that just wouldn't quit fighting! This black devil didn't know when he was licked. He still seemed to think he

was his own boss and king stud of the wild herd.

But it was Black Eagle's spirit that saved him, after all. The horse had all the slick lines and markings of a thoroughbred. That brute's mammy and daddy had been good stock somewhere.

Pride City offered possibilities. The government buyers were not the only customers. Homesteaders were pouring into the country. During the past couple of years every fall and spring brought them by the train load. People who came West by the railroad needed horses, mares and colts.

Elbert Scobey was a business man. He was always ready to meet the trade. Only three weeks before, he had rounded up another wild herd in the hills east of Pride City. He had killed the bald-faced roan stallion and the big black mare running at the head of that herd, but he had saved seventy-seven head of the best stock. And he had forty-four left out of this batch after the kill-off at the trap in the canyon. A big, stout wire pasture south of Pride City assured him of a lot of good stuff to trade on.

Black Eagle would be something else. Some dry-land farmer coming West to set the world afire could be talked into buying the black as a real thoroughbred. He had the lines and the looks that made people buy.

Scobey's spirits were high when he rode into Pride City. His skinnners brought along the captured horses. Behind the skinnners were broad-tired wagons bringing in the hides. Some of the wagons had already come in, heading straight for the hide-buyers' sheds.

Scobey sent the captured animals on to the big pastures where a couple of Mexicans were watching the other horses. Black Eagle was taken straight to the public stables at the southeast corner of the town and turned into a box stall to get used to the stout halter Scobey had buckled on his head.

"An' now," he told his men, "we collect on the hides. Yuh fellas all get paid when we meet in the Two Dot Saloon. We ought to get our pictures in that new newspaper they're startin' in town. Ain't nobody who beats Elbert Paul Scobey when it comes to doin' things in a

big way, an' I'm a great man for dram-drinkin' an' song-singin' when a good job's done."



THAT was the last that Black Eagle saw of him until the following morning. A man cautiously pitched hay in the rack over the feed-box. A pail of oats was poured into the box through a crack. Black Eagle had never seen oats, and he left them strictly alone.

Men came to see him when the tall, thin man returned and he had been let out into a stout corral just behind the box stall. They climbed the fence and peered at him through the cracks. He stood there in the center of the corral, head up, mane rolling in the wind, eyes glowering.

The thin man made the most noise. A stallion had no way of knowing that Elbert Scobey was what men would have described as three-sheets to the wind. Neither could a stallion tell what those men were talking about.

"Twenty dollars," the thin man was gabbling, "to the cowboy who'll ride 'im 'til he quits buckin'. Yes, sir, twenty dollars gold flat in the pan of his hand."

"One hundred dollars gold in the pan of yore hand for the hoss before anybody even tries ridin' 'im."

A little man as old and gray as a desert had come forward. A big Colt hung at either hip, and there was a strange shiftiness in his eyes that seemed to be watching every face around him.

"I ain't no fool." Scobey was laughing, one hand clamped to the fence to steady himself. "Ever'body knows there was a wild hoss sold up yonder 'round Deadwood for a thousand dollars. Men bought 'im an' took 'im all the way to England. I'm told this hoss is a heap better lookin'. Anybody wanta make that twenty dollars gold flat in the pan of his hand? I ain't responsible for the loss of limb or life."

A big man finally came forward, as dark as a horse sometimes saw in the far distant hills of New Mexico. A great deal of haggling took place beyond the fence before two men rode into the corral with their ropes ready.

Black Eagle tried to fight them off, but the men were smart. With crowds swarming up on the fence and great excitement in the air, the stallion was caught and snubbed to a saddle horn. The big, dark man now came forward. For the first time in his life Black Eagle felt a saddle slipped on his back.

The rest was as maddening as sudden gunfire blazing out of a dark, still night. The saddle was cinched down. The big man climbed up, shook himself in his seat, then carefully pulled up an eight-foot length of stout rope that had been made fast to the halter. Suddenly the rope that held the stallion's head to the saddle horn was cut away. Black Eagle plunged backward, almost seating himself on his rump as the two men on the gentle horses quickly spurred out of the way.

It was a fight that did not last seven seconds. The stallion came up as if he had suddenly become a glistening black whirlwind leaving the ground to take to the air. The man in the saddle stayed there for the first four leaps and plunges. It must have been like trying to ride high on a coil of a blacksnake writhing and twisting in death agony. Men on the fence yelled when the horse made his fifth plunge. The man in the saddle was beginning to reel and rock. The sixth plunge lifted him in the saddle. At the seventh lunge he was in the air, a big, leg-flapping thing turning over and coming down on the back of his neck and shoulders to land with a sickening sound on the hard-packed, stony ground.

Gasps and cries came from the crowd on and around the fence as Black Eagle slammed against the wall of the stables and stood there, blowing and snorting, while the man who had been thrown still lay on the ground, not a muscle moving.

It was Black Eagle's first human kill. . .

Elbert Scobey was in a loudly boasting and bantering mood when he returned to the Two Dot Saloon. A bullet could not have been much quicker in killing Big Juan, the Mexican. When the man was dragged out of the corral a doctor announced that his neck had been broken and his skull crushed like shattered glass by that terrific blow on the ground. The same two men who had roped the stallion had roped him again, snubbing him

up to get the saddle and the halter shank off of him.

"Men make a hoss bad, treatin' 'im like that." The little old gray man was still tagging Scobey around. "Crowdin' a fence all 'round with men only scares a hoss when yuh're tryin' to handle 'im. Me, now, I'd ride 'im off by myself where it was quiet. Nary quirt nor spur would I lay on 'im. I know his kind, yuh see. No hoss ever born is true bad. Make 'im know yuh first, an' then yuh've got 'im."

"I've got 'im without havin' to know 'im." Scobey was having another drink. "Maybe I'll sell 'im to some Wild West

"Just this, brother." Rathburn allowed a slow smile to warp its way across his broad face. "I've got a Tennessee jack out yonder on that sidetrack. I call 'im Wrath of the Devil. I'll lay a thousan', two, even three, bust my bellyband, that Wrath of the Devil will whip yore stud in ten minutes. If yuh got the guts of a suck-egg hound yuh'll call my hand or bluff. The cash ain't to hunt—an' neither is my Wrath of the Devil. How 'bout it, mister?"

"I—I don't know about that." A cold, empty feeling was entering Elbert Scobey's stomach. "Yuh see, I never saw

Bullwhip Bill McCracken was as accurate—and as deadly!—with his long and vicious blacksnake whip as he was with the two old Colts which hung at his bulging waist. He's a series character, created by the author of this story, Tom Roan, and he appears regularly in our brother magazine **STAR WESTERN**. Don't miss **BULLWHIP HAULS THE MAIL**, a long and lusty novel in the current issue, on sale now!

show. Maybe I'll take 'im to Cheyenne an' let 'im win a record. Money's what I'm after. I aim to make it on that hoss. He's a fighter. Whip anything on two legs or four, an' I double-dog dare any man who says he won't!"

"Yuh mean that, brother?" A tall man of somewhere close to sixty, clad in homespun jeans, had stepped forward, clean-scraped with a razor except for a rusty-red beard that hung from his sturdy chin like a misplaced forelock. "If yuh do I'll let yuh make a thousan', even two thousan', before the sun goes down."

"Yeah?" Scobey turned and looked at him. "How come yo're so big-hearted all of a sudden, fella?"

"I ain't big-hearted." The larger man's eyes were keen and merciless, about the color of recently melted lead. "I'm known as a man who can squeeze a dollar 'til the eagle squalls. Name's Bunt Rathburn. Out here all the way from the Big Smokies of Tennessee. Takin' up a homestead. Got three boxcars settin' on the sidetrack a mile west of town. My boys an' wimmin folks are unloadin'. Ever see a jackass fight a stud-hoss?"

"Why, no, I ain't," Scobey said wonderingly. "What are yuh drivin' at?"

a jack fight a stud."

"In that case," sneered Rathburn, "takin' yore word agin yore scummy looks, I'll lay two dollars to yore one just to stop yore blowin' an' struttin'. I'm a mule-breeder, I am. Come out here to raise mules, an' I've heard a lot about yuh since my train pulled in last night. They say there ain't a thing yuh won't do to make a dollar. Some say the same thing about Bunt Rathburn, behind my back, they do. Yore blowin' off at the gills about yore stud gets me down. Got any guts or have they turned to yaller water? Bartenders," he turned, big and bold as a burning barn, and looked up and down the room, "let's ever'body in the house have a drink on me. Set me out a pint, boys."

"Look here now, fella, yuh ain't tryin' to start somethin'?" Scobey's large front teeth glinted at him in a leer. "Not a quarrel, I reckon?"

"Neither quarrel nor fight." Rathburn shook back his big shoulders. "Hell, brother, 'f I wanted to fight yuh—well, I'd just snatch yuh up by the tail like I do a snake in a cornfield. I'd give yuh a couple of swings overhead—an' pop yore head off agin yonder wall like crack-

in' the cracker off a whip. What're yuh drinkin' now, tea or lemonade, Mr. Blow Hard?"



THEY bullied the stunned and whiskey-bewildered Scobey into it. Pride City had had all kinds of fights, pistol, gun, fist-and-skull or bottle-bust; all manner of sports that were as bloody and raw as anything that came along. This was a fighting country. Men pointed that out, backed by the able Mr. Bunt Rathburn, the mule-breeding jackass man from Tennessee.

Only one man in the lot tried to take Scobey's part. Nobody bullied him. He was the little old man with the two .45's swung low. No one knew how it got around, but it was whispered about that he was an old Southwest outlaw down on his luck and on the run—a deadly old bat, healed to the eyes and a man to let alone.

Pride City had its way as usual in the end. Elbert Scobey planked a thousand dollars in gold on the bar. Rathburn immediately shelled out two thousand, and shoved the two piles across for the bartender to hold. Others started counting their money. By late afternoon it looked as if every dollar in Pride City was being wagered on the outcome of the fight. Even the women from the nearby dance-halls came trooping in to pony up their pokes. Yankees from the Eastern States bet on the stallion. Those from the South bet on the jack. The Rebels knew what the outcome would be—at least they said they did.

"An' now that the money's up an' there ain't no backin' down," cackled Rathburn, "I'll tell yuh a thing or two, Mr. Blow Hard. Yore stud may kill my jack, for all I know, but if he does it's shore goin' to be a surprise. My Wrath of the Devil's had four such fights this year, an' four times this year he's killed a stud. Belly up, folks, belly up! Mister Scobey's buyin' for the house!"



Black Eagle saw them coming. He had been left alone for a long time. From one corner of his corral he could see

a huge, wired-in pasture at the foot of a long slope. His mares and colts were down there, resigned to all that was going to happen to them. From time to time he had been whistling to them.

There was something else the stallion had heard also. It was a wild braying, meaner than a muddy water hole filled with rattlesnakes. Just before sundown Black Eagle saw the maker of the noise.

Men had returned to the corral, swarming around it, eager-eyed yet nervous, some white-faced and tense. Women came with them this time, their faces painted. The men kept close to them, paying them a lot of attention.

Two men rode into the corral. For a second time during the day Black Eagle felt the sting of a rope as he was snubbed to a saddle horn. It was a surprise to the horse when the men slipped off his stout halter and immediately turned him free again to drive him through a gate into a larger corral. The high, stout fence all around was being filled with people scrambling up for the topmost seats.

The jackass now appeared, a big gray devil with a short-roached mane and a tail sheared until only a tassel remained on its end. He was between two riders, long-legged, gangling young men.

Had it been out in the quiet hills Black Eagle would have gone forward immediately to accept the challenge, but the horse was at a sore disadvantage here. Those people all around had him scared. He stood in the center of the corral, as far away from them as he could.

Never had he seen such a jack. In the hills they were small; especially, far to south where they ran away as soon as a stallion came within sight.

The battle was on the moment they ripped the halter bridle with its see-saw bit from the jack at the south gate. That brute needed no urging or herding. He was eager for the kill, and the stallion momentarily forgot the gang on the fence.

Black Eagle made the mistake any stallion would have made. He went forward, head down, teeth bared. The jack came in with his head up, tasseled tail in the air, every leg stiff, feet appearing to bounce him forward.

The stallion was reaching for a throat-hold, intending to get it and come up

striking for the head with his forefeet. It was exactly what the jack wanted him to do. Throat seeming wide-open for the stallion's teeth to close on it, the jack's head shot down, teeth bared, every move now as quick as lightning. He caught the horse on top of the neck, lunged upward as the horse lunged, and struck out both feet with the fury of guns letting go.

It was remarkable that the horse escaped without maiming injury in that first swift clash. He came around in the dust, breaking the hold on top of his neck, and let drive with a lightning broadside that stumbled the jackass away to one side with a couple of broken ribs.

The jack was hurt, but his injury only angered him. Back into it he lunged, still able to whip any stallion that ever touched four feet to the ground—and only getting warmed up to the real fight in him.



IT WAS fury personified. The dust boiled up, became a blinding cloud. Twice in the mad battle of flying hoofs and reaching mouths both the horse and the jack slammed into the fence. People above them screamed in terror. Unless a miracle happened death was the only thing that would bring the fury to an end.

Black Eagle went down, the noise of crashing planks filling his ears, people screaming and yelling again. The jack moved in, charging through the dust. Up came the stallion, splintered wreckage of wood flying around him. A broken plank in the shattered south gate actually stopped the jack. He struck one end of it and it threw him to one side.

The horse was like a deer breaking through a pile of brush. He had had enough of this thing. Turning heels to run for the first time, he shot away, shoulders raked, cut and dripping. Men tried to turn him, then fell back.

"Wrath of the Devil wins!" bawled the man with the rusty red beard. "Look at yore stud go, Blow Hard! Watch 'im hunt the tall timber—an' my jack right behind him!"

The jack was back there, coming like a storm, never to be rated as a quitter.

It might have ended somewhere far away from the crowd. Black Eagle was not stopping here. He was heading like a hellion down the slope, toward that wire pasture.

No horse could have jumped the gate if the animal had been running uphill. The downward pitch of the slope helped him when Black Eagle reached it. Up like a blackbird with both wings folded against its sides, he took to the air, felt his hind feet slap the topmost plank, and then he was over, stumbling and almost taking a sprawling fall as he struck the ground. Up he came, and out of the corners of his eyes he saw the jack coming over the gate behind him.

That gate was the only thing that could have stopped the jack. His hind legs struck just below the hocks. In the wheel-over, jump broken, he came smashing down inside the pasture on his head, neck twisting under him. There was a grating sound like crumbling rock as the bones of the neck broke, then a quick, spasmodic jerking of his feet, and it was all over for Wrath of the Devil.

But Black Eagle was going on, straight down the pasture, whistling to the mares and colts. A wild nickering broke at every hand. Mares and colts were going crazy. Tails in the air, manes whipping, they followed him.

When he came to the south gate he tried to take it as he had taken the one behind him. Up he shot, but no horse could have cleared it. He struck the top planks with his chest. There was a ripping crash, planks again flying around him. Hurt for the moment, he went through, stumbled, fell sprawling, and lay there, stunned, and then came up whistling.

In a flood like stampeding sheep pouring through an opening, the mares and colts followed—every animal in the pasture fleeing with the black king. What was left of the gate was torn to splinters.

Black Eagle's head was clearing. The cuts on his chest and shoulders were no wounds at all—for a wild stallion facing freedom again.

Long before men could saddle horses to try to follow the herd, it was only a vanishing cloud of dust in the distance—the wild heading back for the wild!

Satan's Silver Shaft

By M. Howard Lane

THE reinsman tooling the Tucson-Ocatilla Express toward the crest of the Huachuca Peaks hadn't the slightest reason in the world for wearing a sly little smile behind the scraggly ends of his tobacco-stained mustache, but he was wearing one just the same.

Out of eyes that were the same steel gray hue of his neat suit, Dave Saxon studied that secretive grin, and he didn't like it. It looked, in fact, like maybe Popper Joe Ranyon had some little trick up his sleeve to play on a stranger. Or perhaps he might not be a stranger to the

whipman, Dave reflected. Deputy sheriffs on their way to Ocatilla town had been identified in advance on other occasions—and one of those deputies had never reached the high Arizona silver camp.

Sheriff Les Wagoner in Tucson had told Dave Saxon as much.

"Seems like there's open season on my men in Ocatilla, Dave, and I'm damned if I know why," Wagoner had said. "Two I've sent there have disappeared complete, and the third was shot on the way in."

"Mebbe," Dave had answered, "I'll reverse that season."

Undercover Deputy Saxon's one-man war against the stock riggers of Ocatilla's silver land brought him to a hair-trigger showdown, where the only chance to save the fortunes of five thousand innocent investors—and his own life—was a thousand-foot drop to the depths of hell!



He punctuated his words by kicking Swartz in the guts.

And right now, he figured, as he regarded that sly grin on Ranyon's lips, might be a good time to start. He wanted to learn what was behind that secretive smile, and probably the best way to go about it was to make the rawhide stager so mad that he would forget to lock his tongue. In this case, Dave figured, the plan had better work fast, for at the last station where they had picked up a fresh hitch, Ranyon had been mighty insistent about him being lots cooler riding up top than in the hot belly of the Concord. Already delving for details that might help him clear up the Ocatilla mystery, Dave had accepted the seat.

The stage was slowing on its last steep pull to the notch of Apache Pass above as the tall Tucson deputy jabbed an apparently idle hand into the side pocket of his gray coat. From the pocket, with elaborate unconcern for the sly-smiling reinsman, he brought a pint bottle labeled *Donegal's Dew*. Gravely he loosened the cork. With maddening deliberation, he moved the bottle back and forth beneath his long, straight nose, while out of the corner of his eye he watched Popper Joe Ranyon's sly smile turn a little sour. He spoke no word as he let some of the bottle's contents gurgle cheerfully down his gullet. But he did manage a realistic shudder as the amber fluid hit bottom. It was nothing but tea, but the driver didn't know that.

Ranyon's smile, Dave noted, was completely gone now. His tongue was suggestively licking his lips. "Mighty danged dry," he said huskily.

Dave Saxon's face had a lean, saturnine cast to it. "Mighty dry," he agreed. "Yes, sir!" The corked bottle found a way back to his pocket.

Ranyon's mean little eyes bulged, and he sent his whip crackling viciously over the backs of the already laboring hitch.

"They can't budge no faster," Dave said mildly.

"I invited you up here to set, not give advice!" Ranyon growled wrathfully.

Dave saw the peak of a man's hat incautiously raised from behind the cover of a red standstone boulder on the steep cactus-studded slope to their right. Another Stetson bobbed into sight alongside the first. The boulder was pretty high.

That pair behind it, Dave decided, was swinging into saddle-leather preparatory to riding down to the stage.

"You sure you didn't invite me up here to get shot?" he asked mildly.

Ranyon had seen those hats too, and his mean face showed that he was hoping his passenger hadn't. "Shot?" he said loudly. "Hell, stranger, I never figured you for the joking kind. I sure didn't!"

"I ain't," Dave said in the same mild tone. There were two Colts in a wide, double gunbelt strapped beneath the knee-length gray of his coat. One of them came into his hand faster than had the bottle of *Donegal's Dew*. Its muzzle bored accurately between a pair of the reinsman's ribs. "This is my insurance," he added. "Ain't a man living can kill me so quick but what I can pull the trigger of this here cannon and take you to hell with me."

At the touch of the gun against his side, Ranyon's leathery face had turned the hew of mildewed parchment. "You're funnin'!" he gasped.

"I ain't funnin'," Dave said sternly. "You tell them hombres behind that rock you've done made a mistake, and that I ain't the gent you thought I was when you invited me up here to set."

"I dunno what you're talking about," Ranyon said sullenly, but he reached up to the tattered, sweat-stained sombrero on his own head and wigged it around.

That, Dave knew, was a signal. He also knew that he would live until he reached Ocatilla town, but just what would happen after he got there was a matter of conjecture.



THE thing that happened first was something a man couldn't rightly expect. With a flourish of whip, and flurry of dust, Popper Joe Ranyon brought the Express into the high silver camp at a gallop. Usually, Dave knew, the arrival of a stage in any out-of-the-way place like this would arouse the interest of its citizens. But today no such thing was happening. There were men, and a sprinkling of women, on the boardwalks that ran beneath wooden awnings slanting out to curb-side from second-story falsefronts. They were gathered together

in groups and their conversations seemed more important than the arrival of the mail coach. The only ones who looked up appeared gloomy. In fact, the whole of Ocatilla seemed blanketed beneath a pall of gloom, and an unearthly quiet. Dry fellows rattling in the Corncord wheels was about the only sound to break the hot stillness of the afternoon.

Dave looked at the baked, barren ring of desert hills surrounding this high plateau. Hills studded with ugly ore dumps, and gaunt mine buildings, and the answer to the unusual quiet was at once apparent to him. No wisps of steam were rising from boiler houses. No winches whined in shaft houses. No *champ-champ-champ* came from stamp mills pulverizing rich blue silver ore.

"Why, damn me!" Ranyon said. "The mines ain't workin'!"

Dave thought he caught a note of pleasure in the stager's voice, and that was odd because if the mines here had closed, Popper Joe Ranyon would be out of a job.

There were two men standing on the stage station platform to welcome the Express. One, wearing paper sleeve-holders and a green celluloid eye-shade, was obviously the agent. He, too, looked quite pleased with himself for no apparent reason.

The other hombre was broad and heavy. His paunch strained at the seams of his shirt, and shook when he moved. He wore criss-crossed gunbelts, and tie-hard holsters. His fat, swarthy face was dark as a Mexican's. Pinned to the pocket of his blue plaid shirt was a fancy gold star.

Studying this Ocatilla marshal, Dave got the impression that his arrival here without any holes in him was something of a surprise to this pair.

Popper Joe Ranyon's sudden words as he braked to a halt alongside the platform jarred the Tucson deputy to his boot straps. "Lem!" He started yelling shrilly at the local lawman. "Lem Swartz, I want for you to arrest this goldarned cuss settin' alongside me! He rammed a gun in my ribs a-comin' up the grade, and threatened to kill me. Throw him in the lock-up, and soon as I cut the dust loose from my gullet, I'll be down to swear out one of these here formal complaints.

"Cuss is carryin' a bottle," he added in aggrieved tones, "and didn't even offer me one drink. That's a-goin' in the complaint, too, and there ain't a jury in these mountains that'll think much of you, young feller, after readin' it!"

In the course of thirty years living, Dave Saxon had had some queer experiences, but this, he told himself, was one of the best. With a deputy's badge pinned to his boot-top he was about to be arrested by a tinhorn marshal in a silver camp that looked as though it had died a sudden, unnatural death. He'd done a better job of confusing Ranyon than he'd expected, he realized.

Gravely he looked at Ocatilla's marshal. "Wa'al," he queried, "ain't you going to pull a gun on me?"

The marshal acted a little flustered. "Come off that stage peaceable, and there won't be no call for me tuh use a gun on you!" he blustered. "Jest don't go reachin' for them irons on yore hips, and we'll get along right peaceable."

Ranyon was chuckling. "Next time mebbe you'll think twice afore stickin' a Colt in a peaceable gent's ribs," he said righteously.

Amusement narrowed Dave Saxon's gray eyes. "Next time," he drawled, "I'll pull the trigger!"

With Ocatilla's glowering marshal beside him, Dave paced soberly back along Lode Street. He picked up impressions as they moved along. Some of them were a little startling. In the space of the ten or fifteen minutes since they had passed this way the scene back here along the street had changed. Men still in muckers' clothes, gamblers, ladies of the evening, and business men alike were starting to wear smiles on their faces, and mill toward the invitingly open doors of a pretentious saloon that called itself The Discovery.

The conversation of two approaching merchants caught at Dave's attention. Hysterical excitement was in their voices. "Talk about your manna from heaven," one of them was saying, "this is shore it! The Silver Bucket, The Bronco, The Sadie C and The Burro close down on account of that danged Bucket runnin' a shaft into an underground river that is flooding the workings of every danged mine. Nothin' to do but close down. Ruin,

she looks like. Ain't a one of us in town but is holdin' shares aplenty in them mines. Mebbe a cuss is a fool to gamble in mining stock, but I know you and me and a lot like us have sunk every penny we could scrape together into them holes. . . ."



MORE than these merchants and miners had invested their dollars in Ocatilla silver, Dave knew. Shop girls in San Francisco had put their slender savings into these stocks. The names of the great mines in the hills about this camp were household words from the Oregon border to the Rio Grande. Clerks and stevedores, cowpokes and housewives had put their dollars on the line to buy stock in the mines.

So had the silver-haired sheriff who had asked him to come here. Les Wagoner, who had given him his first law job and imbued in him the principles that might didn't always make right.

"Some of us," he had told Dave Saxon in that long-gone day, "have got to help protect the weak and foolish. That's one reason for havin' laws. Another thing: This is goin' to be a great country some day, and it's you and me and more like us who'll have to help it grow. Mebbe we'll do our bit with gunsmoke, for there's a-plenty men in this West who will spend their lives scheming how to take honest dollars out of folks' pockets. Them's the kind you'll be after, Dave, as long as you wear a badge."

For the space of ten years those were the kind Dave Saxon had been after. But a man couldn't follow the law trails forever. Wagoner had told him that in Tucson.

"Dave, boy," he had said, "I'm quittin' at the end of this term. Every penny I've got is in Silver Bucket stock. It's paying good dividends, and I've turned 'em right back into more shares. I'm retirin' next month and buyin' me a little ranch. Figger the dividends I'll collect will keep me and Mom going quite a spell. Howsomer, the sheriff had added, "I won't step down until we learn what's happened to the men I've sent to Ocatilla. . . ."

The words the sheriff had spoken were

ringing in Dave's mind as he listened to the excited talk of the two men paralleling them on the walk, and he was thinking, even as he listened, that the fate of those two lost deputies might somehow be tied in with the closure of the mines.

He was thinking, too, of the thousands of investors like Les Wagoner who had put their savings into Ocatilla silver. Men and women with simple dreams, like the sheriff, who would see them come crashing down about their ears once word of what had happened here leaked out.

The talk of the merchants caught him again, and this time their conversation jarred Dave to his heels. "That broker, Thad Kallman, must be drunk or a fool to be offerin' to buy everybody's stock in town at fifty cents on the dollar. "Course it ain't but half what we paid, but I for one am gettin' out and taking the half a loaf. Manna from heaven, I call it! Mines full of water ain't wuth a damn, and I ain't hankering to paper my house with wuthless stock!"

If the shafts in the four great mines about the town were filling with water that pumps couldn't handle, why was a broker named Thad Kallman holding open house in The Discovery and buying stock as fast as owners brought it to him?

Dave thought that over and looked at his captor. "That there Discovery Saloon looks like a right popular place," he suggested. "Might be we could stop there and hoist one?"

"Depends on who does the buying," Lem Swartz growled.

"I got a few dollars that ain't going to do me no good in your jail."

"Now, that's right, ain't it!" Swartz smiled for the first time. "Howsomever, I like the likker they serve in The Spike, on up the street. Don't make no difference where we drink, does it?"

They were opposite The Discovery now. Dave turned toward the saloon's open doors. "Does to me," he said placidly.

Swartz scowled, and muttered under his breath. "Danged if you ain't the peskiest prisoner I've took in weeks!"

The Discovery was full of cigar smoke and men. Confused talk rose against the dark rafters overhead. Dave looked the place over from just inside the door.

It was easy to identify the broker, Thad

Kallman. He had taken over a poker table at one end of the room, and two boyish clerks, looking a little pale around the gills, flanked him on either side. They were busy making out the necessary receipts for stock certificates that were piling up about a metal strong box.

Kallman, a bluff, hearty looking man, was contriving to give everyone the impression that he was doing them a favor by buying their worthless stock. His clerks didn't look that way, though. They looked just plain scared.

"Wonder why?" Dave muttered.

"You say something?" Swartz was right at his elbow.

"I say let's have that drink. My bottle got empty comin' up here."

"If you hadn't drunk it all, you might not a-got arrested. Joe is funny about such things."

"If I hadn't drunk it all, I wouldn't be here. What have you Ocatilla hombres got against deputy sheriffs?" Dave watched Swartz as he rather back-handedly admitted his identity. The swarthy marshal did not change a hair.

He chuckled as he answered the Tucson deputy. "I can keep order around town without no help from Wagoner's law-dogs. Far as the mines go, they do their own policing."

Dave felt like a man banging his face into a wall that he already knows is there. Les Wagoner had mentioned in their Tucson talk that the Silver Bucket and other mines were outside the limits of Ocatilla town, and thus under county jurisdiction, but that fact just hadn't penetrated his consciousness then. Now it did, with complete suddenness. And all at once, Dave Saxon had a pretty complete picture of why deputy sheriffs weren't welcome around Ocatilla.

He put his flat middle against an open space at the bar, where many of the miners and other citizens were busily drowning their apprehensions for the future. Ocatilla was dead. Overnight. Its great mines, pouring out millions of dollars to bolster the credit of a nation that needed such money, were lost. It was a thing that had happened elsewhere in the West. Only those camps, to Dave Saxon's certain knowledge, hadn't objected to having deputy sheriffs handy.

He lifted a glass from the bar and turned to Swartz. That worthy gentleman was trying desperately to catch Thad Kallman's eye. His face flushed when he found Dave watching him.

"How?" Dave said gravely.

Swartz gulped his drink. Dave poured two more from a bottle the barkeep had put at his elbow. "Good," he said.

"We better be gettin' along to jail," Swartz said. "Deputy or no deputy, you cain't assault citizens without good reason. So you're going to stay in my *calabozo* until—"

"Until Ranyon can rattle his stage back to Tucson with a dispatch to be put on the wires that Ocatilla mines are flooded, huh?"



THE words brought an instant reaction. The swarthy Swartz reached for one of the tie-hard guns at his hips, and Dave sent his right fist straight out from his shoulder. The blow caught the town marshal on the point of his soft chin and drove him backward into a pair of innocent drinkers. The marshal's heavy body carried them to the floor with him.

Dave cast one glance about The Discovery. There were a lot of men in the saloon, but they weren't going to be there long. With a motion almost lazy he brought his long Colts from beneath his coat.

"*Yowwww!*" His howl rose to the rafters. "I'm an Arizona wildcat and this is my time to howl!"

He punctuated his words by kicking Swartz, who had arisen, in the guts, and then firing into the floor at his feet. The lead was a miraculous stimulus. As a group the drinkers managed to scramble toward the doors. Others were moving for the nearest exits, and one of the first to duck beneath his table and dive for a window with his coat-tails flying was the broker, Thad Kallman. His clerks sat petrified in their seats as a very accurate shot scattered the stack of certificates in front of them. A second neat shot clanged off Kallman's strong-box.

Dave back-stepped to put the solid wall past the end of the bar at his back. Grinning now, he furrowed the floor with lead

at the heels of the throng which had suddenly lost all interest in selling Ocatilla silver stock at cut-rate prices.

One of the scared young clerks at the table where Kallman had held forth was trying to struggle from his chair. Dave sent a bullet skittering across the table in front of him.

"You two hombres set tight," he yelled at them, "and you won't get hurt."

Kallman's malevolent face appeared at an open window. "You'll rot in jail for this!" he yelled.

Dave was grinning. He looked like a tall young devil on the loose. In a situation less serious he knew that he would have enjoyed clearing this saloon of its motley crew. But the stakes were too high for enjoyment.

Swartz appeared beside the broker. He sent a hasty shot through the open window, and it thudded unpleasantly into the wall not far from the Tucson deputy's shoulder. Dave drove one of the remaining two bullets left in his guns through the glass above the marshal's head. He and the broker ducked from view, and suddenly The Discovery was quiet.

Dave had one of his smoking Colts reloaded, and was busy on the second one when the barkeep's scared face lifted cautiously above the bar. At sight of the lanky deputy he ducked again.

"Come up from there," Dave said sternly. "*Poco pronto, amigo*. Do what I tell you, and you ain't going to get hurt. Cross me up, and you won't have a bottle or glass left in this place by the time I get through."

The barkeep rose a second time. He took one look at Dave Saxon's face, then shrugged. "I'll dance to your tune, mister," he said resignedly.

Dave nodded. He glanced at Kallman's two young clerks, who obviously were not used to this sort of thing. They looked like men fearful of dying quick and sudden.

"You three hombres," Dave told them sternly, "are goin' to do what I tell you." He gestured with the muzzle of one gun at the clerks. "Get on your feet and yank the curtains down over all the windows. Do it from the side so's nobody can get a squint at you, or yuh might get pot-shot. There's a lot of hornet-mad hombres

millin' around outside, and they ain't going to be particular about who they plug."

"Danged if I blame 'em much," the barkeep grumbled. "You're playing this hand mighty high, wide, and handsome."

A round, pot-bellied stove that warmed the place in winter stood against the wall. Dave swung the muzzle of one Colt toward it. "Build up a fire in that thing," he directed the barkeep.

"Blue hell and blazes!" the apron ejaculated. "Ain't it hot enough in here without a fire?"

Dave grinned. "It's goin' to get hotter when I toss a hand-full of cartridges in there."

The barkeep bleated. "You'll bust my stove—"

Dave fished a gold piece from his pants pocket. He tossed it to the protesting keeper. "This'll buy you a new one."

Staring at the coin he'd caught, the barkeep shook his head. "Mister," he said in a suddenly decisive tone, "I know what's the matter with you. You're loco!"

Sober-faced all at once, Dave looked at the barkeep. "You may be right at that, amigo," he said flatly. "Come dark, we'll find out."

The pair of white-faced clerks had finished their chore. Like men walking on eggs, they approached Dave Saxon. "We—" one of them began.

Dave waved the man to silence. His narrowed gray eyes studied the pair thoughtfully. "When me'n Swartz walked in here," he began, "yore boss looked pleased as a cat licking cream. You two gents looked scared as kids caught stealin' green apples."

"We—" the spokesman for the pair said again.

Dave interrupted the man once more. Dusk was deepening over Ocatilla town, but it wasn't dark enough yet to make a sneak from The Discovery. He still had time to pry some answers from this pair.

"How many Ocatilla mine owners does this boss of yours represent?" he asked abruptly.

The spokesman for the clerks licked his lips. "All—all four of them."

Dave nodded. "That's what I'd figured. Rigging stocks," he went on, "is

a game smart jiggeros have been playin' this side of the Rockies ever since gold was discovered in Califony."

"You think—" one of the clerks began.

"I think," Dave told them flatly, "that a good many thousand poor folks like you and me are going to be ruined so's that cussed Kallman, and the four-way combine he represents can git back for a tenth of its worth all the stock they've sold investors. T'ain't hard for a crook manager to close down a shaft and start the word around that they've blasted into an underground river. Get a rumor like that goin' around the exchanges and your stock drops to bed-rock. Then it can be picked up by brokers like Kallman for ten cents on the dollar. After it's all corraled, the big bosses can announce that a water shut-off has been effected. Then their stock sky-rockets, and they can sell it all over ag'in and collect both ways from the deuce.

"Only this time," he went on, "we're goin' to see can we monkey-wrench their game, and you're going to help me. I don't think you two young punkins got brains enough to be guilty of anything yoreselves, but from the way you looked when I walked in here, I got a hunch that you think something is stinkin' too."



THE barkeep had been listening open-mouthed to Dave Saxon's talk. "Blue hell and blazes!" he exclaimed. "I got me a hundred shares my own self of Silver Bucket. Where's my gun? I'm going skunk hunting!"

"You're stayin' right here," Dave grunted, "until I prove my talk. Mebbe with you on the right side we won't need no ammunition dropped in yore stove to make folks think I'm still here. That being the case, I want for you to take yourself a gun, and if anybody tries to get in chase 'em out with lead afore they get a chance to see who is doin' the shooting. Fact is, I'll swear you in as a deputy sheriff so's things will be half way legal."

The barkeep had a bulldog Irish face. "Gorry," he grinned, "I'm with you. Dang it, though, mister, I can't quite see why you went tuh all the trouble of clearin' my place when you could have

slipped up to the Bucket and took a look-see without raisin' any fuss."

Dave chuckled mirthlessly. "Two reason," he said crisply. "I kept Kallman from cornering all the stock in Ocatilla, and I don't figger they'll send their report outside until they pick up everything loose around here. Second reason is this. Les Wagoner has lost two deputies here, and *somebody's goin' to pay for them murders!* Make folks mad enough," Dave's voice softened, "and sometimes they git reckless and lay themselves open."

The two young clerks had the innate honesty of most men, and they had courage of a sort. The one who had constituted himself their leader spoke firmly to Saxon.

"We had a hunch there was something wrong when Kallman started buying up stock after the mines closed, but we kept still because we're sort of greenhorns and didn't know what else to do. Neither of us hanker to wear any stock-rigging stripe, so you name us a chore and we'll do 'er."

A smile flickered on Dave's lips. "*Bueno*," he nodded. "You'll come out of this a couple of heroes or with lead in yore briskets."

"You got a job for us then?"

Dave nodded again. "I'm slippin' out the back way now, and making a sneak to the Silver Bucket. Give me fifteen minutes or so. Then you start shooting things up, barkeep, and you two young jiggeros hightail it through the door like all hell was at your heels. Tell anybody out front that I'm a rootin', tootin' drunk-town deputy, and aimin' to lead up the first hombre who sticks his nose into the saloon. Got that?"

The clerks nodded vigorously.

"*Bueno!*" Dave approved. "Tell that story scary, then locate Kallman and Swartz. You're going to give them something different to chew on. Tell 'em I'm drunk and claimin' the Silver Bucket ain't hit water. That closing the mines is just a stock-rigging scheme, and that they got rid of Wagoner's deputies so's they couldn't trip 'em up by investigating any reports handed out. If that don't bring me company, pronto, I'm shooting mighty wide of the mark."

The barkeep had been listening with

his mouth open again. "But, feller," he protested, "you trot yourself up there alone, and if them gents are guilty they'll be comin' for you a-smokin', and we'll have another deputy to bury!"



A FLURRY of shots broke out behind Dave before he had covered more than two hundred yards after letting himself from the rear door of The Discovery. The sound brought a curse to his lips. That cursed open-mouthed bartender, and those two greenhorn clerks had jumped the gun on him. He had told them to give him fifteen minutes. Instead they were making their play in less than five!

It put a premium on time. Dave shucked his coat and cursed the tight dress boots he was wearing. Those boots hadn't been made for running, but if he was to get himself settled in the Silver Bucket shaft house before Swartz and Kallman arrived he'd have to move fast. That pair, and whoever might be their underlings, would be heading for the mine in a hurry . . . if his hunch was right.

Ten minutes more hard going put him close to the collection of buildings that housed the Silver Bucket's headquarters and machinery. High against the lighter shine of the night sky, he could make out the silhouette of the shaft house. Trousers ribboned from his stiff climb through sage and cactus, Dave moved openly toward it. There was no need to hide his presence. If his hunch was right, even the night watchman had been pulled away from this mine to allow no chance of the shaft's true condition to leak out.

His breathing from the quick climb hadn't quieted when Dave stepped through the square opening into the shaft house. For the space of a second he stood there on the rough plank floor, nerves the years had tuned to danger warning him he'd made a mistake. As his mind received the warning, the soft hiss of escaping steam from the hoist engine's safety valve reached him through the darkness, and Dave knew instantly he was in for trouble. Fires banked since this mine had closed on the previous night wouldn't have kept steam in the boilers this length of time.

Lem Swartz's voice at his back, and the feel of muzzle steel against his spine caught him at the same time. "Hold still, deputy," the marshal drawled. "I had your play tabbed when you made that remark in The Discovery about Popper Joe Ranyon carryin' a dispatch of the mines closing back to Tucson. Knew right then you had things figured pretty close to the nub, and when you busted up Thad's buyin' spree I was sure of it. Knew you'd get up here sooner or later, like a couple of other nosey deputies have done."

Dave licked his lips. "And what you aimin' to do about it, Swartz?"

The answer came from another source, on the heels of spearing light as a coat was drawn from about the bright gleam of a bull's eye lantern across the shaft house. The light and the voice came from the cage hanging ready to descend.

"We're going to ride you downstairs to see how much water you can find," Thad Kallman said wickedly. "And we're going to leave you there—behind a stope that a little dynamite will help to cave in."

He was in a tight and he knew it. There'd been others down the years, but Dave doubted if anybody had ever had the deadwood on him quite like this before.

Light from that lantern showed him the long, gaunt shape of Popper Joe Ranyon in the cage with the broker. The stage agent, himself, was at the hoisting brake ready to release the drum that would spill out whining fathoms of cable and drop them to the heart of the shaft.

"You've used rough spurs, deputy," Swartz gloated. "How do you like ours?"

There was a stubborn streak in Dave Saxon that made him desire the answer to one more question regardless of the outcome. "The same way," he told the marshal, "that the rest of Les Wagoner's deputies must have liked it."

"They had their ride to Purgatory," Swartz agreed. "You can ask 'em how they liked it when you meet 'em in hell."

The man was infatuated with his own oratory. It was the loophole in the other's armor, Dave had been seeking. He felt the pressure of the revolver against his back relax its steady pressure as the marshal bragged, and as the muzzle shifted Dave made his bid.

He kicked back with one hard heel

and flung himself forward and sidewise. Swartz howled as the blow caught his shin, and his gun rising involuntarily blasted across Dave Saxon's shoulder. The Tucson deputy felt spent powder prick the side of his neck, and then his side-ward lunge carried him behind the protecting cover of the hoist engine.

Lead from Swartz's Colt as he plunged ahead to line his sights on the Tucson deputy screamed off cable. Light from the bull's eye lantern in the cage was seeking him frantically in the furious seconds of this combat, but its catching him was a risk worth taking, Dave figured. He ducked, swung back, and thrust out one long leg.

Swartz tripped over it. His heavy body plunged toward the cage, and Kallman inside it had to sidestep to keep from being struck. The Ocatilla marshal sprawled at the broker's feet.

Dave was on his feet, and he was grinning recklessly as he flung himself at the stage agent who had been trying futilely to free a Colt shoved inside his waistband.

He caught one fleeting glimpse of the agent's face, and heard the man's bleat as his hands closed about the other's wrists and yanked him into the clear.

"You belong with your amigos in hell!" Dave told him. "But you ain't going there until a court has its say. Then mebbe you'll have some bigwig company."

His twist sent the stage agent spinning toward the open cage. Kallman had cleared a sleeve gun, but before he could fire the little weapon, the agent's body smashed full into him.

Dave was at the hoist controls by the time it happened. He let the brake slip until little but the top of the cage was visible, then he called to his prisoners across the shaft house.

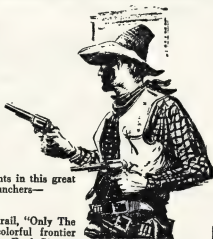
"You gents," he told them grimly, "ain't on your way to Purgatory—yet. Half way betwixt and between is where you're goin' to land. It'll give you time to repent your danged sins, and me time to see if there's an honest whip-popper in Ocatilla willin' to drive a stage-full of tinhorns to the Tucson jail!"

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CLOTHES DON'T MAKE A TOP-HAND

By Dave Sands



Then he's up beside his steer. That loose-hided devil looks big enough for two cow brutes now.

An ornery Brahma steer, running wild with the 'gators and mosquitoes in the bayou thickets, started the legend of the Mission River madman. And a heartbroken youngster in a new pair of pants had to finish it, regardless of the risk—or be booted out of the county!

OLD Gus Isbell tells me that sometimes he feels just like saddling a hoss and riding off down the road, talking to himself. Human nature's got him that buffaloed. Old Gus claims that, plumb innocent, he starts this madman mystery on Mission River when he's just a hair-brained youngster. And now that

him and it are getting along in years, he couldn't stop that wild tale short of a war.

The thing starts in Santone, the way Gus tells it. He's there to see his first rodeo. He's coming eighteen at this time, tow-headed and full of vinegar. He's still young enough to know the world is his apple—and he likes apples.

He watches the rodeo hands put on their show and listens to the crowds cheer. Young Gus thinks he'll have some. He knows he's done work that rough, riding for his pa, old Ike Isbell, down on the Mission. But that's out in the brush where the crowds don't cheer and the wages is scant. Why ain't he in that arena drawing down glory and big purses for his work?

The rodeo officials inform Gus of one main reason. He ain't of age. They tell him there's a law in Texas what forbids 'em to let a minor risk his neck and hide in the rodeo arena without his parents' consent.

Gus heads for home to get it. He stops off for a spell at the Joe Chapman outfit to drop his wings and strut a little. He's been shining up to Nell Chapman for a couple of months now, and here looks like a chance to spread his feathers. He parades before the gal in a pair of fancy rodeo pants he's bought in Santone. Kid-like, he lays it on thick about how he'll go far in this life, wrastling down those rootin', tootin' steers.

His brag and fancy pants put the shine in the gal's eyes, all right, but when he rides on home, old Ike Isbell ain't likewise impressed. Ike says hell no. Ike says all the future there is in the rodeo game is a bunch of busted bones and no place to hang your hat when you're wore out. Ike tells Gus to go saddle himself a fresh hoss and work some of them wild ideas out of his head, helping the crew finish a fall beef gather.

This puts Gus in a jackpot. His heart's bent on seeing the world from the back of a pitching hoss. He's made his brag to his gal. And now his old man says hell no.

Gus's young pride suffers. He can't let sleeping dogs lay. "Pa," he says, just about every day, "I'm telling you I'd be a ring-tailed heller in a rodeo arena!"

He warns Ike real constant. This pestering finally gets under the old man's hide and he loses patience. "Well, dammit!" he flares one day. "If you're the saddle hand you claim to be, I've got just the job for you. I've let Joe Chapman sell me an outlaw Brahma steer, range delivery, and now there ain't a hand on the place what can bring him in. Go make a try for

that critter and we'll see how tough you are!"

"You mean," Gus pops up, his blue eyes shining eager, "that if I bring in that old Brahma, you'll sure let me foller the rodeos?"

Ike hedges. "Let's see you get him first."

"I'm done after him!" exclaims Gus, rattling his spurs fast in the direction of the hoss lot.

Ike ain't give him no real promise, but Gus is getting desperate and grabbing at straws. He saddles the best hoss on the place, a long-legged bay that steps like a cat and has got plenty of bottom. He hits a lope for the Chapman spread and explains the set-up to Joe. He tells Joe that Ike's done promised to let him take up rodeoing if he can bring in this outlaw steer. Gus wants Joe to tell him where this old steer's hiding out. Gus just ain't got no damn time to waste steer-hunting, he says.

"You better let that steer alone," Joe advises. "He's an old mossy-horned booger and he's mean. He's hanging out with the bull 'gators and mosquitos in them bayou thickets at the mouth of Mission and he ain't to be crowded out of his *querencia* without a fight."

But Gus's horns don't hold enough wrinkles yet for good advice to bluff him off. "You tell me where to locate that steer and leave the rest to me," he brags. "That *ladino's* fixing to learn how a rodeo hand works!"

Joe sees there's no use. He sends along a Mex *vaquero* to show the kid to the old steer's hideout and hopes for the best.

This Mex leads down-river into a big *mogote* of huisache and thorny retama. It's down where the salt grass is stirrup high and the bull 'gators waller and roar in the marshes. The ground is shaky underfoot here. Spanish moss hangs in forty-foot streamers from the postoaks and liveoaks. Wads of ticks bow the tip-ends of the brush. The mosquitos is fogging the air, humming their blood-thirsty tunes. It's sure a lonesome and spooky country where this old outlaw Brahma hangs out.

But Gus, he don't mind. Gus is convinced they don't come no tougher than him. He's out to bring in a bad steer and he's hell-bent to complete the job.

THEY jump their steer along in the middle of the morning. He's a cream-colored old scalawag, long-horned and droopy-eared. He's thin as a butcher knife, hump-backed, leggy, and built for running. He's wild. He takes to the brush with his tail up and his dewlap a-flopping. He knows this *brazada* like a woman knows her kitchen. He rattles his hocks on a twisting run through it with speed and confidence.

But if he thinks he's giving Gus Isbell the slip without a run for his money, he's fooled. That kid has got all his hopes for the future tied up in that old steer and he's riding like a drunk Caranchua on a raid. Sometimes he's down off his saddle on one side dodging the brush, and then agin on the other. He's sure feeding the spur to his bay and they're busting a hole in the switches a man could drive a wagon through. They've left the Mex guide like he was staked to a stump. If there wasn't a sound like a Kansas twister traveling through the brush, the Mex wouldn't know which way the run went. Like it is, he don't never catch up.

Gus has knocked water out of just about every bayou and hog waller in the country when he finally crowds his Brahma out onto a strip of prairie. Gus downs his rope then and shakes out a loop to fit. He's done made up his mind what he aims to do. He'll latch onto that outlaw, throw him and side-line him. Then he'll rub tobacco in the old devil's eyes so he can't see and drive him home like a milk cow.

The bay's pulling up on the steer now. Gus rakes his ribs and the animal throws on an extra batch of speed. He shortens the distance to rope length. Gus whips the air above his head with his loop and makes his throw. He twines them high-standing Brahma horns like a rodeo professional.

He bogs his spurs and rushes his bay past his catch. He's got his rope tied hard to the nubbin, and when the bay passes the steer, Gus flops the slack in his rope to the far side and gathers it up under the critter's heels. It's neat work. The Brahma takes a buster that makes him bounce.

That's the trouble. The rascal bounces to his feet agin. Gus throws him a second

time and the old scalawag just repeats.

Gus ain't for sure, but he reckons he throws that steer a dozen times or better, but the critter don't stay down. Gus don't more'n jerk his feet out from under the brute when the old steer is back on 'em agin. And every time he comes up, he's madder'n he was before.

This kind of work is killing on a hoss. Gus's bay is in a white lather and don't spring under the spur like he did. Then he goes to his knees in a hog waller and the Brahma sees his chance. He closes in with low horns and a big beller.

It looks like Gus and the bay'll make bull 'gator bait, if the big lizards feed this far from water. But the hoss comes to his feet in time and he don't need to be told this is a hurry-up case. That ringy Brahma's horns is right in his rump and the hoss starts traveling. And Gus ain't pulling back on the reins none.

It's a close haul from there to the first strip of timber, with maybe the bay gaining a couple or three jumps on the steer. The hoss wheels around a big post oak and the steer tries to short-cut on him. The rest comes fast and rough.

Gus' rope is a stout, hard-twist hemp, but a heavy steer and a fast hoss running agin it at the same time is too big a strain; it parts at the steer's horns. But not before it's jerked the bay and the Brahma both off their feet and throwed Gus clean of the saddle.

The bay and the steer come to their feet at the same time, but Gus has taken a hard fall. He ain't thinking quick. He's just managed to get to his hands and knees, facing the steer, when the Brahma slams a horn under his belt and tries to sling him clear over that post oak.

Gus don't know whether he goes over the tree or not, but he knows he goes plenty high. And when he comes down, he's minus his bull-hide chaps and fancy rodeo pants. That fighting scalawag steer has stripped him to the bare meat from his waist down and is packing his clothes back into the *brazada* on a tossing set of horns.

Gus claims he's too stunned at first to realize just what a jackpot he's in. He catches up his spooked hoss, then it hits him. He's made his brags about bringing in this outlaw steer, and now he stands

here on the lone prairie with his hind-quarters bared to the mosquitos.

And them insects ain't long in locating new feeding ground like this. Gus ain't hurt bad, but on his legs the hide is broke in long scratches down to his boot tops and there's mosquitos trailing up his blood scent from a mile away.

Gus sets down on a log and fights off the insects for a spell and thinks what to do. If he takes the trail of this steer and tries to get back his clothes, the brush and mosquitos will chew his meat down to the bloody bones. If he rides in home for more clothes, Mission River folks will laugh him plumb out of Refugio County.

He tries to think of some place he could go and steal some clothes, but he can't think of none. He could wait till night and sneak in, but can he stand the mosquitos that long? Right now he can rake off a handful at one swipe and there's a second handful waiting to take their place. His hide's done on fire. Best Gus can figure out, he's sure in a fix.

Then he hatches off an idea. The mosquitos can't get him if he goes and lays in the river. He can lay in the water till night and then sneak in home after dark for some clothes.

He buttons his brush jumper around his middle, mounts, and keeps to cover while he rides to the river. There he sheds the jumper and crawls out into the water. He feels so much better here, with his nakedness hid, that he's able to give that Brahma one of the soundest cussings ever delivered to a steer from the middle of the Mission River.

He's laying there, planning how he'll get in home tonight and take after that steer tomorrow, when he hears a ripple in the water behind him and turns to see a drift log floating downstream. It's right on him. He moves over to let the log pass, but the log moves over, too.



GUS'S blood clabbers sudden-like and he comes close to knocking the river dry, he quits the water that fast. That log's a bull 'gator drifting down on him and the scaley devil's belling and whipping at Gus's legs with his tail as Gus goes out up the bank.

Gus lands in his saddle without touching a stirrup. He's run his hoss half-way home before his scare drains out and he pulls up to find hisself whimpering and shaking till the saddle leathers rattle. He's sure had a close shave and it's hard for him to get over it.

Gus never knows no despair like what he experiences riding on home in broad open daylight with nothing but a brush jumper to hide his nakedness. He never knows before how lonesome a man can get for a pair of pants. But the mosquitos and hide-blistering sun are driving him to cover and there ain't no other trail to take.

If Gus ever gets out of this jackpot, he swears he'll be a better boy and listen to what old Ike tells him. If he knowed a prayer, right here he'd say it, when he sneaks into the back of the home spread, keeping to a finger of brush that reaches down toward the barn and corrals. He's hoping to hide out in the barn loft, buried in the hay, till he sees an opening to make a safe run for his pants.

He don't even get to the corrals for a while, though. He peeks out of the brush to find the whole ranch in an uproar. There's hound dogs barking all over the place. There's women talking loud and excited and hands roping out mounts and saddling up quick. He sees old Ike come out of the back door, loaded down with saddle guns and six-shooters. He sees his ma and two sisters hurrying out to where one of the hands is hitching a span of mules to a wagon.

The women climb into the wagon. Ike hands the guns out all around, then crawls up with the women. He gives some orders Gus can't hear at this distance, pops the mules on the rump, and the whole outfit takes out down the road toward the Chapman ranch in a fog of dust. The hounds is yipping and yowling and leading the run.

Something highly exciting has stirred this bunch up, but under the circumstances Gus don't stop nobody to find out what. He ain't too interested. All he wants is a pair of pants and it looks like he's fixing to get a clean break at some.

Gus says maybeso it's different with Injuns and Africky natives, but he's willing to bet his bottom dollar nothing can give a white man more pleasure and satis-

faction than a pair of good pants, when that white man ain't got none. Gus crawls into an extra pair and just sets down on the bed to relax and enjoy the feel of 'em. It's half an hour or better before he even thinks of going out to slip the saddle off his hoss.

When he does, he gets to recollecting how all his folks leave out on the run, like trouble's brewing somewhere. Maybe border rustlers or something have made a raid on the Chapman spread. Could be, from the amount of artillery old Ike was handing out.

Gus suddenly remembers Nell Chapman and gets a flash picture of how he'd look defending her from a bunch of rustlers. He forgets his pants troubles then and starts hurrying.

He's gun-hung and riding a fresh hoss when he squats his mount in a dust cloud at the Chapman ranchyard gate thirty minutes later. He's looking grim and fierce to the huddle of excited women on the front gallery and he wants to know what the trouble's about.

"There's a madman on Mission River!" exclaims his sister Anne.

"Nell and Mrs. Chapman seen him!" explains his sister Betty. "Down by that Water Cress spring."

"The menfolks has taken to the brush with the dogs to get him," says Ma Isbell. "Now you be careful of a man like that, son. It's a Lord's mercy we ain't all murdered in our beds!"

Gus can hear the hounds cold-trailing a mile away now. He catches a glimpse of Nell Chapman's wide-eyed fright. He don't wait for more information. He wheels his hoss and takes out down the trail, riding hard. If there's a wild man loose on Mission River, he's got to be rounded up and put where he can't be scaring the women folks. Gus ain't the sort of young brush-popper to let his women folks get scared.

It's a grim and hard-eyed bunch of manhunters Gus finds combing the brush down past the spring. They're riding in close bunches and spreading out every now and then to surround a thicket. They've got their saddle guns drawn and laid across the bow of their saddles. They're whistling and whooping at the hounds, urging 'em to pick up the trail.

The hounds is circling wide, working every inch of the ground. They're plumb eager for the chase, but they don't pick up the scent of nothing worth running. Now and then one bawls hopeful a couple of times at the cold scent of a cat or wolf. But when the rest rush in to join up, the trail peters out complete.

Ike Isbell is cussing the dogs for a bunch of wuthless biscuit eaters when Gus rides up. Jess Barroum, one of the Chapman spread hands, speaks his mind.

"I'm telling you," he says, "a hound can't trail a crazy man. When a man goes mad, he don't leave no scent."

Joe Chapman tells Barroum he's crazier than a bed bug.

There's a suspicion entering Gus Isbell's mind that makes him weak in the stomach. This ain't far from where that bull 'gator runs him out of the river.

"What's happened?" he questions Joe Chapman and Ike. "What did Nell and her mama see down here?"

"A wild man!" says Ike.

"A crazy man!" says Jess Barroum.

"They was getting watercress at the spring when they seen him," says Joe Chapman. "He come ridin' hell-for-leather past 'em."

"Riding a bay hoss," added Barroum, "and naked as a skinned lizard."

"Let's work deeper into the *brasada*," says Ike. "We've got to get him. Damn them no 'count hounds, nohow!"



THEY swing the hunt off further into the brush. Gus Isbell follers. He don't know what else to do. He knows now why them hounds of old Ike's won't take that trail of the madman. Them hounds know his scent too well. They can't savvy Ike trying to get 'em to run the trail of his son Gus!

Gus pulls off to the far side of the hunt, where the riders can't see how sick he's getting. If them hounds don't never catch on to what Ike's trying to get them to trail, Gus Isbell will live a happier life. My God, thinks Gus, Nell and her mama have seen me naked!

The hunt moves three-four mile back into the huisache and mesquite. It's sun-down now. Gus has pulled further from

the main bunch, still wondering what to do. Then the hounds open on a trail that's smoking hot. They have been urged for better than an hour to run something and they're plumb frantic, they're that eager for a chase. They pile onto this hot scent and run it fast, talking it up loud.

They're right close to Gus when they open. He looks up and catches a glimpse of what they're running. It's that old outlaw Brahma steer, sneaking out ahead of the hunt like a loafer wolf.

But what paralyzes Gus and cuts off his breath is the sight of his fancy rodeo pants still hanging to that old steer's horns!

Somewhere, that old outlaw has lost Gus's bull-hide chaps, but them rodeo pants is hanging to his horns where they'll be a dead giveaway when the hounds bring this old steer to bay and this bunch of manhunters ride up. One look at them garments, and it won't be hard for the outfit to figure out who Nell Chapman and her mama has seen riding naked through the thickets.

Panic hits Gus Isbell. He hooks his spurs to his hoss and lifts the animal across all the low places in the *brasada*. He can hear the rest of the bunch hollering to the hounds and busting the brush open to join the chase. They think they've jumped their wild man and they're spurring up to get in on the kill.

He don't know yet just how he aims to do it, but Gus has got to catch that damn scalawag steer and get his pants off the critter's horns before anybody else sights him. If Nell Chapman and her mama ever find out they've seen Gus Isbell riding naked through the brush, Gus knows he's going to wither and curl up.

Gus Isbell makes the ride of his life on this run. Thorny brush is clawing and tearing at his hide. It's whipping him blind and trying to knock him out of the saddle.

But Gus don't feel it. Gus's reputation as a cowhand and all his chances for romance with Nell Chapman is hanging to that steer's horns, and Gus has got to get them pants. Get 'em or die. It don't much matter which, to Gus Isbell.

He ain't got no rope, but if he did he wouldn't have time to use it. He knows from experience he never could throw that

old steer with a rope and keep him down, nohow. There ain't but one thing for Gus to do. That's ride onto that outlaw steer and bulldog him. Bulldog him and hide them rodeo pants before the balance of these reckless riding brush-poppers catch up.

Gus has got guts, but in normal times the idea of fair-grounding this steer would curl his toenails. This old *ladino* is bigger and heavier than anything he's ever seen in a rodeo. There ain't no clean ground to work in. There ain't no hazer to help keep that steer in line. The odds are about a hundred to one Gus don't come out alive, if he bulldogs this Brahma.

But under the circumstances, Gus don't weigh odds. When there ain't no other bet to make, considering odds is a waste of time. A man's got to shoot the works then.

Gus is riding a fast hoss and he's pushing it hard. He crowds up past the tail-end of the running hounds. He passes the pack leader. Then he's up beside his steer. That loose-hided devil looks big enough for two cow brutes now, but Gus kicks out of his stirrups, bunches his muscles, and waits his chance.

The steer busts through an opening the size of a wagon sheet. Gus catches his breath and piles off on him.

For once today, old Lady Luck's riding with Gus Isbell. He catches a horn in each hand and his grip holds. All his weight's on top of his hands. The steer's head goes down. Both horns ram into the ground. The Brahma turns a wildcat. And Gus falls clear and to one side. He ain't even got the weight of the steer's neck across him.

The Brahma has taken a buster this time that stuns him. Gus comes to his feet, quick as a cat and desperate. He straddles the steer's neck. He grabs the outlaw's nose with one hand and holds his horns in the ground. With the other hand, he yanks at his frazzled rodeo pants. He tears them loose and takes a wild look around for a hiding place. He can hear the brush popping back of him. The manhunters is close. Gus ain't got much time left for pants-hiding.

Then he catches sight of a gaping armadillo hole. It's right beside the steer's shoulders, like it's made for him. That

armadillo hole looks better to Gus than a pile of double-eagles would to a scrub-woman. He shoves them damn fancy pants in that hole clear to his shoulder.

♦ ♦ ♦

HE'S setting quiet and calm on the steer's neck when the manhunters ride up out of the brush.

"Well, gawdamighty!" says old Ike Isbell. "We figured you was running that crazy man!"

"He's got that old *ladino* steer!" exclaims Jess Barroum.

Joe Chapman shakes his head. "Be dogged," he says, "if I ever thought there was a man alive who could rope this steer out of the brush, much less bulldog him!" He turns to Ike. "Looks like, Ike, the bluff we hang up for the kid has been called. Looks to me like Gus can rodeo."

Old Ike sets there in the middle of his saddle and looks down on Gus like he's seeing the boy for the first time. "I reckon he's about got his growth," he agrees. "I sure hate to see a boy of mine take up rodeoing, but I ain't one to stand in a *man's* way when he's made up his mind. You got my permission to rodeo, Gus, quick as we round up this crazy man running loose here on Mission River."

Gus ought to be glad at this news, but

he ain't. Thoughts of performing in a rodeo arena throws a sudden scare into him that makes him shake all over. What if he was to bulldog a steer some day and lose his pants?

"Give me a rope to side-line this steer with, Pa," Gus says to Ike. Then he adds, "I've been thinking some about this rodeoing. Seeing as how you're objecting and all, I reckon I'll just stay right on here and work my cattle in the brush."

"Well, I'll be damned!" says Ike.

It's night now and Joe Chapman suggests they call off this manhunt till morning, which they do. Gus rides in behind his side-lined steer, wanting the worst in the world to confess he's the madman they're after, but knowing he ain't man enough yet to do it. . . .

It's forty years later before he can see the joke on hisself enough to confess his crime. Then it's too late. He relates this tale, but don't nobody believe him. They've heard too many tales about the Mission River madman by this time. They all know too many folks who know folks who've seen this crazy man riding the brush in thunderstorms and fogs and black nights. They figure that Gus Isbell is lying. Either that or the old brush-popper is going crazy. Who ever heard of a man with a sound mind riding naked through the brush?



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HOT LEAD RANSOMS

CHAPTER ONE

Hand-Made Sheriff

THE coach creaked to a halt in front of the stage company's office and Rodney Hardin swung down from the high seat, where he had been sitting beside Pete, the driver.

He slapped dust from his clothes and shoved his wide-brimmed hat back on his black hair. Then he hauled his saddle from the boot and swung it onto a wide shoulder. His high-heeled boots clicked on the boardwalk as he headed for the Esmeralda Hotel.

The red wheel of the sun was dropping behind the ridges of Big Snowy and the half light softened the harsh outlines of Ordway town, giving to it a sense of peace and quiet that was wholly unwarranted.

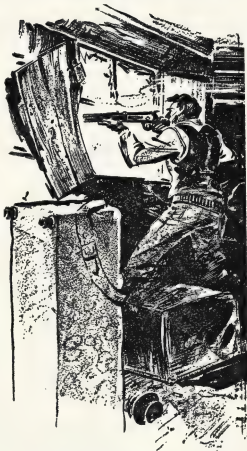
Hardin's brown eyes, with little puckers at the corners, swept along the street. Nothing had changed. Store lights were beginning to vie palely with the last remnants of sun. Driscoll's Emporium still had the same dusty looking clothing display, and over in the harness shop the little window was still crowded with saddles and riding gear.

As he neared it, the Esmeralda Hotel still sprawled a little drunkenly, as though the fumes from the bar at its near end had caused the whole structure to sag.

Hardin shouldered through the batwings into the cool dankness of the interior. Over the bar, the big hanging oil lamps were lighted. He eased his saddle down in a corner and went over to the bar.

"Whiskey," he said. His mouth was dry enough to spit cotton.

The bartender was new to him; he had the pallor of a man who seldom gets out into the sunlight. He set out a glass and bottle and Hardin poured a drink. He wondered what the old man wanted. The letter, when it finally caught up with him down on the Neuces, had been urgent. It



would have to be big trouble to make old man Thorndyke yell for help.

He saw Pete pause at the door that led from the bar into the hotel proper and then cross the lobby and enter the office at the back.

Even after a two year absence, he still felt a little guilty about being here. Old man Thorndyke would never let any of his Slash T riders patronize the Esmeralda House bar. Gun fights were quick and easy there, and the boys were apt to come out feet first, or at least packing lead.

Garvey, the hard-eyed owner, stood in with the county seat politicians and had

★ *A foreman's job—and a beautiful girl—were for Rod* ★
★ *Hardin's taking, if he could eel out of a three-way gun* ★
★ *trap, fist-whip his way to men's respect—and finally save* ★
★ *his neck from the frame-up murder gallows of the law!* ★

THE SLASH T

By Morgan Lewis

*A novelette of
fighting cowmen*



Bullets were finding their way in through the windows at the sides.

got himself elected sheriff. Since then rustling had flourished, and Garvey either couldn't or wouldn't control it. If, by any chance, a rustler was caught, taking him before the corrupt county court was equivalent to turning him loose.

Money flowed in to Garvey, more than could be accounted for by his hotel, and he had risen steadily in power and authority until now he was the dominant figure in the town. His word was law and he had plenty of tough deputies to back it up.

Two men came into the bar, had a drink and went out; business was slack. Hardin nursed his whiskey and pondered whether to ride out to the ranch tonight or wait until morning. Now that he was almost there a weary unrest was upon him.

Pete came out through the lobby and

disappeared into the street. Hardin poured another drink.

The floor creaked under a heavy tread, and Hardin looked up to see the big figure of Garvey enter through the door from the lobby.

He came over to the bar and leaned an elbow on it, a few feet from Hardin. He was a big, meaty man with a face that looked as though it had been made from red clay, hardened and smoothed, and studded with eyes as shiny and hard as nail heads. They were studiedly cold now as they stared at Hardin.

"So you're back."

He gave the words a vicious twist that brought Hardin's head up with a jerk.

Hardin had never liked the man. He stared back at him.

Garvey evidently had not expected an answer. "Are you headin' for the Slash T?" His voice rasped Rodney Hardin's nerves.

"I might be," he said shortly.

"Don't do it!" Garvey warned. "Not if you want to stay healthy."

For a moment surprise overcame Hardin's sense of anger. "You've either said too much or too little, Garvey," he said tightly. "What's on your mind?"

Garvey straightened up. "You've always carried your guns too low to suit me," he said. "There's been plenty trouble around here and we don't want you out on the Slash T stirrin' up more."



HARDIN turned deliberately and poured whiskey into his glass. He couldn't quite figure it out. Garvey was trying to force a fight—and yet he had never been noted as having a fast draw. He looked into the back mirror and caught a blurred movement in the dim corner of the room. The white-faced barkeep was bending over the sink, and not a foot from his hands was a scattergun.

When Hardin turned back to Garvey there was an icy anger within him. *Whip-sawed!* They figured to get him in a three-way cross-fire.

Garvey moved out from the bar. "We don't want no saddle tramps around here," he blustered. "Get out!"

"Garvey," Hardin said, and his voice held a metallic ring, "you never was so big you could tell me what to do."

The big sheriff took a step forward and Hardin, with a sweep of his arm, sloshed the glass of whiskey into his face and fell flat on the floor, dragging his gun loose as he fell.

Bullets crashed into the boards behind him and the sound of the firing reverberated through the room. He shoved his gun out straight before him and triggered twice. The figure in the corner straightened up and toppled with a crash.

Garvey was cursing and staggering around, trying to paw the whiskey from his eyes and get his gun loose. Hardin heard the clatter of feet from behind the bar. He shoved back beneath the overhang and trained his gun on the sheriff.

"Put up your hands," he said grimly, "and tell that bartender of yours to throw that scattergun over here and come out with his hands up!"

Garvey blinked and nodded to the bartender. There was a clatter as the gun landed on the floor in front of Hardin and then the man showed his white face around the end of the bar.

Hardin stood up and yanked Garvey's gun from its holster and tossed it behind the bar. He holstered his own weapon. "You've had this comin' for quite some time," he told Garvey—and deliberately brought up a bony fist with all the thrust of his shoulder behind it. It cracked solidly against the sheriff's jaw and dropped him flat on his back.

Hardin looked at the motionless figure a moment, then picked up the scattergun and went over and got his saddle. He paused at the door. "Don't never try that on me again!" he warned the barkeep, and went out.

At the livery stable he hired a short-coupled bay mare and cinched on his saddle. There would be hell to pay when Garvey woke up! He stepped into the saddle and faded from town in the direction of the Slash T. . . .

It was close to midnight when Hardin tied the mare to the hitching rail in front of the ranchhouse veranda. A light was burning in the right wing where the old man slept.

He went softly up the dark steps and knocked. After a long minute of silence there was a faint rustling. The door opened only to the length of the chain bolt, showing no light behind it.

"Who is it?" The voice was feminine and tense.

"It's me . . . Rod Hardin." Unconsciously he lowered his voice to match the girl's.

There was a gasp of relief and the chain rattled.

Hardin stepped inside, closing the door after him, and stood silently while the girl lighted a lamp. The yellow glow flooded out and Jackie Thorndyke turned to him. A robe was wrapped about her boyish figure and her reddish brown hair rippled loosely to her shoulders. The same hint of red was in her fine curving brows, but her eyes were a clear blue.

"I'm glad you've come, Rod," she said fervently. "It was so long; we were afraid you wouldn't make it."

Hardin moved his hand a little. "I was down in Texas." He nodded toward the bedroom door. "What's the light on now for?"

"Dad's been hurt . . . shot," she said hurriedly. "We don't know who did it; I've been sitting up with him. He'll want to see you directly, but first let me tell you about things. Archer's gone bad—just like you said he would. Dad doesn't know just how bad. I'll tell you when we come out." She opened the door to the bedroom and Hardin followed her through.

CHAPTER TWO

Foreman From Hell

GALUSHA THORNDYKE lay in the massive four-poster bed, his leathery, weather-beaten face making a dark blot against the whiteness of the pillows. His gaunt form lay quietly beneath the blankets but his sunken old eyes were fiercely alive.

He stuck a bony hand from beneath the covers as Hardin came to the side of the bed. "Boy, I'm glad to see yuh," he said hollowly.

Hardin shook hands and Thorndyke shifted impatiently to an elbow while Jackie stuffed pillows behind him.

"Fust," Thorndyke said, "I want to say that yuh was right and I was wrong. Archer turned out to be a no-good hombre. I'd kick 'im off the place, but some low-down skunk put a bullet into me when I was drivin' in from town. Got me through the hips and I can't walk a step."

Hardin simply nodded. He knew what a wrench it was to the old man's pride to have to admit that he had made a mistake.

Thorndyke sagged back against the pillows. "I want yuh to take over, Rod," he said. "From now on yuh're in charge. Fire Archer but don't start no gun-play if yuh kin help it. He's mean and he's fast on the draw . . ." His voice trailed off as though he were exhausted.

Jackie leaned over and tucked the blankets around him. "Try to get some sleep now, Dad," she urged. "You can talk some more to Rod in the morning."

There was an unusually close bond between father and daughter. Thorndyke had raised her alone and unaided ever since his wife had died when Jackie was two years old.

Now she nodded to Hardin and they went quietly from the room.

"How did you catch up with Archer?" Hardin asked as they came into the small room that served as an office.

"Dad caught him sleepin' a calf," Jackie said. "It had been ear-marked but there wasn't a sign of a brand. Dad fired him, but right after that he was shot, and now Archer refuses to go. He treats Dad like a child; says he wouldn't think of leaving him while he was flat on his back. He's hired a couple of tough hands to back his play and none of the other boys want to start anything."

"Anything else?" Hardin asked quietly.

Jackie nodded. "Dad doesn't know it but we've been losing cattle steady. They don't go in bunches but just seem to dribble away."

"Anybody else been losing stock?" Hardin wanted to know.

"There's been a lot of rustling," Jackie said. "Faulkner over at the Box F has lost a lot."

"Who's Faulkner?"

"He bought Quarter Circle K and changed the brand to the Box F about the time you left," Jackie said. "He reported his losses but Garvey doesn't seem to do anything. There's a rumor that the rustlers have a hideout in the hills around Big Snowy."

Hardin slumped down in the arm chair before the desk and shoved his fingers through his black hair. "Suppose you scoot along and get some sleep," he suggested. "I'll bunk here on the couch for tonight."

"All right," Jackie said. She put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm glad you're back, Rod. I'll feel much safer knowing you're on the job."

Hardin grinned and watched her scuff across the floor. At the doorway she paused and looked back. "Be careful," she warned. "Slim Henderson tried to back up Dad when he fired Archer and Archer beat him up pretty badly."

After she had gone he pulled his boots off and lay down on the couch. He was

still wondering why Garvey had been so anxious to prevent him from coming out to the ranch. . . .

Jackie Thorndyke called him in the early morning. He sat up and wiped the sleep from his eyes and pulled on his boots. He wasn't entirely awake until he went to the pump and splashed cold water on his face.

From the window, Hardin could see that the boys had finished breakfast and were spilling out toward the corral. He buckled on his gunbelt and went out with a reassuring grin at Jackie.

Archer was near the corral, giving orders, his big compact body braced aggressively forward.

Hardin went down the slight slope from the house and walked toward him. The boys saw him and a whoop went up. They dropped what they were doing and crowded around, shaking hands and pounding him on the back. Archer swung around and his pale eyes narrowed. The two tough hands moved over near him.

Hardin broke away from the waddies and went up to the foreman. "You've played out your string, Archer," he said. "You're fired. Get your warbag and get the hell out of here, pronto! Take your two side-kicks along."

Archer stepped forward, an ugly twist to his thin lips. "I'm foreman here and I ain't takin' no orders from a saddle tramp like yuh." His voice was savage.

The waddies behind Hardin fell silent. Slim's scarred face was a grim reminder of what Archer's fists could do.

The expression on Hardin's face didn't change as he drove his fist into Archer's snarling mouth. Archer's head snapped back; blood spurted. He gave a roar of rage, lowered his chin on his heavy chest and came in with both hands swinging.

Hardin ducked, got in two quick blows to the body. Then Archer's arms closed around him.

As pain shot through Hardin he arched his back, drawing his body away from the foreman's, and rammed both fists to Archer's mid-section.

Archer gasped, his grip slackened. Hardin wrenched loose and worked on the face. But the foreman was tough; he kept boring in. The dust kicked up by their circling feet hung in a golden cloud about

them. It was a finish fight with no holds barred.

A cold, merciless rage was upon Hardin. He hooked his foot behind the foreman's heel and heaved. Archer hit the ground and rolled over on his face. Before he could rise, Hardin was on him. He seized the sandy hair and pounded his face on the ground, grinding it into the dirt. Even after Archer had ceased to struggle, he kept pounding until Slim and another man pulled him off. Archer lay silently in the dust.

Hardin's face lost its look of black anger but a cold fury still burned in his eyes as he turned to Archer's two hands. "Get your broncs and get out of here!" he snapped. "And take him with you!"

With Archer to lead them they might have made a play, but without him, and with the rest of the waddies ready to back Hardin, they were licked.

Slim rolled Archer over and threw a pail of water on him. Archer gasped and sputtered and sat up. Slim helped him to his feet, where he stood unsteadily. His battered features worked as he tried to speak, but no words came. He got over to his horse; two waddies boosted him up. The three rode off without a backward glance, Archer sagging in the saddle.

Hardin mopped his face with his bandanna and managed a crooked grin as he rubbed his bruised knuckles. But Slim's face wore a look of concern.

"We ain't seen the last of them, Rod," he said. "Archer ain't the man to take a beatin' like yuh just handed him."

"I'll take time out later and worry about that," Hardin said. "Now tell me about this rustlin'."

They were in the ranchhouse kitchen and Jackie was doctoring his ear. "That's how it is," Slim concluded. "We got line riders out every night but we're losin' stock steady."

"How about the side that joins the Box F?" Hardin asked. "Do you cover that?"

"Why, no," Slim said.

"You see," Jackie interposed, "Steve Faulkner has his men riding the other boundaries, so there isn't much chance of the rustlers getting through on that side. He's been losing more cattle than we have; you know the other side of his range runs up against Big Snowy and we

think that's where the rustlers hide out."

Down at the corral, a man swung from a huge black gelding and dropped the reins, leaving him ground-hitched.

"That's Faulkner," Slim observed as they went down the steps and headed across the yard. "He comes over most every day to check up."

"He's got a nice eye for horse flesh," Hardin said.

"That's ain't all," Slim said significantly, jerking his head back toward Jackie.

Faulkner came up the path to the house, swinging his quirt against the top of his ornamented boots. There was an air of confidence about the man; the way he carried his wide shoulders, the tilt of his expensive Stetson on his black, silky hair; the way his bold, black eyes rested on the two men as they approached.

The three men paused as they came abreast. "Mornin'," Slim said. "This here is Rod Hardin, the new foreman."

Hardin nodded. "Howdy."

Faulkner's eyes went to Slim. "Where's Archer?" he asked quickly.

"I fired him," Hardin said evenly.

Faulkner stared hard. "I hear that you killed a man back in Ordway last night," he said, and waited. When Hardin kept silent he continued, "If I was you I'd light out of here; Garvey swears he'll hang you for it."

Hardin's eyes narrowed a trifle. "I reckon you would, but I'm tired of travelin'—I aim to stay." His voice was mild but its implication was clear.

Faulkner flushed as he said stiffly, "It's up to you," and went on to the house.

Slim swung into step beside Hardin. "Who all was yuh shootin'?"

"Garvey and one of his gunmen tried to work a trap on me," Hardin answered absently. They reached the corral and Hardin picked up a rope and started inside. "Keep your eye on things, Slim," he said. "I'm going to take a ride."



HARDIN rode due north until he came to the boundary line. He had worked for old man Thorndyke since he was little more than a butler and the vast acres of the Slash T were home to him. He had hunted and trailed

cattle over every foot of ranch and the surrounding territory and he knew it as few men did.

At noon he ate with some of the line riders. Shorty, an old-timer, squatted across from him. "We lost some more stock, Rod," he announced morosely. "It beats me how they do it. The boys was ridin' line all right and they swear they seen nothin'."

"Keep your eye peeled," Hardin said. "They're bound to slip some time."

He got his horse and rode along the line until he came to the creek that formed a partial boundary between the Slash T and Faulkner's Box F ranch. Even now, in the spring, the water was shallow, flowing slowly over the stony bottom. In the summer it would be a mere trickle. He rode along the bank until it swung off to the right and headed deep into Box F territory. He left it, then, and continued on along the boundary line.

It was late in the afternoon when he finally swung left and headed for the ranch; there was a puzzled frown creasing his forehead. If the rustlers had been using the unguarded line as a cross-over, there would have been some indication, but there wasn't a sign along its entire length. There were cattle tracks along the bank of the stream, but that was to be expected as the creek was the only source of water in that section of range, and it was used by the stock from both ranches.

He turned his horse into the corral, washed up at the pump and went into the cook shack. He took a seat at one of the long board benches and when the cook brought food he ate slowly. He had ridden hard all day and his leg muscles felt rigid as iron. He was nearly finished when one of the waddies poked his head in the door.

"The old man wants to see you, Rod," he bawled.

Hardin shoved his plate back and went up to the house. Old man Thorndyke took a look at his face and grinned. "I hear yuh climbed Archer's hump."

Hardin nodded and pulled up a chair beside the bed and talked with him for a while. The old man seemed to be in good spirits at having got rid of Archer. Jackie came in and beckoned. Hardin followed her into the office.

"Steve Faulkner's bringing some of his crew over tonight," she said. "He seems to think that the rustlers are getting ready to stage a big drive."

"Why?" Hardin asked shortly.

"Well," said Jackie, "both ranches have been losing more and more cattle and he thinks they're getting bolder."

"Doesn't he think we can handle our own boundaries?" Hardin asked bluntly.

Jackie flushed a little. "It isn't that," she protested. "He knows we haven't enough hands to thoroughly cover all the lines and he says he'll ride the northern boundary of both ranches."

Hardin shrugged. There was no sense in letting his dislike of the man influence his judgment. It would be a help to have one boundary taken care of. "I'll tell the boys," he said and went out.

Faulkner was down at the corral. "My men are riding the north border," he said, "I'll string along with you for tonight and see if we run into anything."

Hardin nodded and went into the bunkhouse. He would rather have had one of the other ranchers in the neighborhood, but the constant rustling had tightened nerves, and neighbor was regarding neighbor with growing suspicion. At least Faulkner seemed friendly.

"Double shift tonight," he said. "Everybody out."

The waddies had put in a long day and there was some good-natured grumbling, but they started for the door, buckling on their gunbelts as they went.

There was a trampling of hoofs outside, and as Hardin got to the door, Garvey had just swung down from his horse. Hardin got a glimpse of mounted men behind him and then Garvey yelled, "There he is!" and his gun swung up.

Hardin instinctively jumped backward as lead tore into the door jamb. He caught a glimpse of a half smile on Faulkner's face and then he swung the door shut. He grabbed a heavy table and shoved it against the door. Then he was running the length of the bunkhouse. He knew that he was as good as dead if he gave himself up to Garvey; would probably never stand trial.

Outside, men were yelling. He could hear a horse pounding along the house toward the rear. There was a confused

commotion behind him and the door groaned and gave a little as men put their shoulders to it. The table slid and the door swung open as Hardin went out the back way. He paused an instant and a rider slewed his horse around the corner. Hardin crouched and took him from his horse in a flying leap. His gun barrel cracked against bone and the man slumped limply.

The pony snorted and reared as Hardin grabbed the bridle and vaulted into the saddle.

Hardin pulled sharply to the left so as to get the width of the bunkhouse between himself and the posse and kept the horse at a dead run into the dusk. Men and horses streamed around the corner of the building in pursuit.

He smiled grimly and leaned low over the horse's neck. If he couldn't cross them up on his home ranch he didn't deserve to get away. . . .

It was hours later when Hardin pulled up at the point where the creek swung off into Box F range. He had shaken the posse long ago and now a slim crescent of moon was sailing over Big Snowy. The memory of Faulkner's half smile had stayed with him and started a hunch working in his mind. He forced the horse across the stream and rode into a clump of cottonwoods at the bend.

He had barely tied the pinto in the dense shadows and moved to the edge of the trees when he froze suddenly. Horses were coming along the stream bottom.

Hardin edged back into the shadows and waited. Two horsemen rounded the bend and pulled up not ten feet from where he crouched. And then the pinto whinnied!

Both men stiffened in their saddles. One turned suddenly and Hardin saw the gleam of moonlight on steel.

The other relaxed. "What yuh so jumpy about, Red?" he chuckled. "It's jest a wild hoss. I seen a bunch in here this mornin'."

Red slowly holstered his gun. "I'd feel a lot better if yuh was still on the job," he growled.

"Yuh got nothin' to worry about," the other man said. "The boss is ridin' the east line with 'em."

(Continued on page 102)

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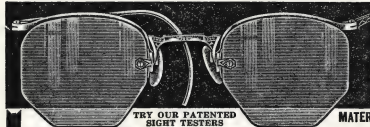
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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

(Continued from page 100)

Red shook his head. "I dunno," he said dubiously. "From what I hear, this Hardin is a tough hombre in a scrap. He once took yuh over."

"He won't no more!" Archer snapped. "By now Garvey's got him headed fer town and yuh know he'll never git there alive."

"Mebbe so," Red said, "but rustlin' a few head of stock is one thing—stealin' a herd of close to two thousand is somethin' else agin'."

"Yuh gittin' yaller?" Archer sneered. "Them steers'll be safe in the hide-out and there ain't a man around here kin find 'em."

In the shadows, Hardin softly pulled his gun loose. Off to the left he could hear the herd coming along the creek bed. It was becoming clear to him now. While Archer had kept the Slash T men away from the boundary line between the two ranches, Faulkner's men had taken the rustled cattle along the creek until deep into Bar F range. Then they had hustled them into the fastness of Big Snowy.

That was why there had been no traces of the stock that had disappeared. Now that Archer had been fired, Faulkner had decoyed the Slash T riders over to the eastern boundary with the promise of having his men cover the north boundary. Hardin shoved forward. "All right, get those hands up!" he said softly.

Red gave a startled oath, started to raise his hands. But Archer pivoted and red flame spat through the darkness.

Hardin's gun rocked in his hand and the man slumped over his horse's neck and slid into the stream. Red whirled his horse and, bending low, spurred for the opposite bank. Hardin's bullet rolled him from the saddle as he was going up the rise. He landed on the shelving bank and half rolled, half slid, into the water.

CHAPTER THREE

One-Man Rustler War

FROM up the creek bed, in the direction of the advancing herd, came startled cries. Hardin holstered his gun and blundered his way through the

Hot Lead Ransoms the Slash T

trees back to the pinto. Those cattle had to be turned; their loss meant certain ruin for old man Thorndyke.

A rage burned within Hardin that made him grim-lipped as he thought of Faulkner, riding with the Slash T outfit under the guise of friendship while his rustlers cleaned up the herd. He mounted and rode to the edge of the bend. Down the creek came the cattle, splashing in the shallow water.

A horseman appeared on his left. Hardin fired, then drove forward across the line of advancing cattle. His gun roared in their faces and his coiled loop swung madly. The leaders bellowed in sudden fright and braced themselves against the press of the herd behind. Hardin gave them no time. He yelled at the top of his lungs and swung his loop against their sensitive noses.

They jammed for a moment—and then the leaders swung and started up the bank on the Slash T side. Hardin flayed around with his rope and they bawled frenziedly while the gravel flew from under their driving hoofs. Now that they were started he rode back along their flank, and the startled steers broke before him and stampeded up over the bank in a mighty wave.

Hardin pulled off to one side and watched while he fumbled fresh cartridges into his gun. The only thing that had saved him so far was the fact that the rustlers had trusted to the creek banks to keep the herd from straying and most of them had been back at the far end hurrying the stragglers. Red and his saddlemate had been posted to see that they followed around the bend into the Box F domain.

Now the rustlers swept down on the Slash T side, trying to turn the cattle at the point where they were streaming up over the bank. Hardin saw a horse stumble and go down; horse and rider disappeared under the driving herd. Hardin raced the pinto along the bank, firing as he rode. Lead whistled past him as the men on the opposite bank saw him.

Riders showed up ahead on his side of the creek. Gunfire blasted the night and something smashed into his left shoulder, knocking him forward on the pinto's neck.

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Pain rocked him in the saddle. Hardin grabbed the horn and hung on grimly, while the tough cow pony raced ahead. At the point where he had turned the herd, he forded the creek and pounded along on the flank of the stampeding herd. If he could keep ahead of the men following him, he had a fair chance of getting away, for the gents on the other side of the herd were powerless to get to him.

The crescent moon had been sinking lower over Big Snowy; now it disappeared completely. In the wild turmoil of the stampede it was impossible to distinguish between the sound of horses and cattle and Hardin could not tell how closely he was being followed. He did know that he couldn't go much farther without fixing his shoulder. He touched the pinto with the spur and pulled off to the right, away from the herd.

A few hundred yards farther on he paused. Minutes passed, and then he heard the pound of hoofs and the creak of leather as men went by. When he could no longer hear them, Hardin untied a latigo strap and fashioned a sling to take the weight off his arm.

Then he headed back for the ranch-house. He had done all he could. The rustlers would never be able to round up the herd in time to get them off of Slash T range before morning.

◆ ◆ ◆

LIKE a huge bulb, the sun was pushing shoots of light over the hills that marched beside the distant Musselshell when Hardin came within sight of the ranch. He reconnoitered while the pinto walked slowly and wearily. There was no sign of life about the bunkhouse and the corral was empty. But a thin line of smoke arose from the ranch-house chimney.

The pony came to a stop in front of the veranda and stood hip-shot while Hardin dismounted stiffly. He had been in the saddle almost constantly for the last twenty-four hours and his joints creaked.

He forced his shaking legs to carry him up on the porch and over to the door. He

knocked and leaned heavily upon it. When it opened he pitched forward and would have fallen had not Jackie caught him. Hardin grinned wryly and pulled himself up. With Jackie's help he got to the kitchen and sagged into a chair.

The girl's face went white at sight of his blood-stained shirt but she set quickly to work to cut it from his shoulder.

Hardin fished the makings from his pocket and Jackie paused long enough to roll and light a cigarette for him. Then she poured hot water into a pan and started to clean the wound. She knew Hardin would talk when he was ready.

He took a long pull on the cigarette. "Faulkner's men was rustlin' our stock," he said briefly. At the words he felt Jackie's hands tighten on his shoulder. When he looked around her eyes were wide and staring.

"Faulkner?" Her voice faltered.

Hardin nodded and remained silent. Down at the corral there was a sudden trample of hoofs and he looked out to see the Slash T riders coming in from their all night watch. Slim swung down from his horse and started for the house.

Jackie broke the silence. "But Faulkner . . . he's been so friendly . . . he's been helping us . . ."

Hardin nodded a little impatiently. "While we was guardin' the east line, his crew was runnin' the steers along the creek bed to Big Snowy."

Jackie went to the pan for fresh water. "I can't believe it, Rod. He doesn't seem like that kind."

Slim came in and his eyes widened at sight of Hardin's shoulder.

Hardin outlined to him what had happened. "Where's Faulkner?" he asked.

"Him and the sheriff stuck with us 'til most mornin'," Slim said. "Then they pulled out. The sheriff allowed he was goin' lookin' for yuh and Faulkner wanted to git back to his outfit."

Hardin tried to force his tired brain to face the facts. "Him and the sheriff," he said, almost as though talking to himself, "will stick together 'til they meet up with Faulkner's outfit. Then they'll learn that we're on to 'em." He paused while Slim kept silent, following his reasoning.

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"'Bout ten, countin' yuh an' me," he answered. "But four of 'em are still out on the range. Why?"

"I think we're in for some trouble," Hardin said quietly.

"But why?" Jackie interposed. "Surely the rustlers wouldn't dare to attack us."

"Why not?" Hardin asked. "Put yourself in their place. Knowin' what we do, they'll either have to quit the country—or wipe us out. Garvey knows that once we spread the word, the honest cattlemen'll gang up and string him and Faulkner to a limb—and he's got too big a stake to quit. He can make it look legal by sayin' he was after me for murder. My bet is that they'll fight, and we ain't got near enough men to hold 'em off."

Jackie didn't say anything. She took the pan of water and disappeared outside.

"It's gonna be hard on her," Slim said.

"Her and Faulkner got along good."

"Suppose you mosey along and tell the boys to get some sleep before the trouble starts," Hardin suggested. "Tell 'em to stay inside."

After Slim had gone, Hardin went in to see the old man. He figured it was time he knew the facts.

When Hardin told him, old man Thorn-dyke's gray eyes flashed and his lean jaw set rigidly. "The dirty, double-crossin' coyote," he roared. "Git me down to that bunkhouse and give me a rifle."

Hardin thought he would be safer down there than alone in the ranchhouse so he got a couple of the boys up and they carried the old man down and laid him on a bunk in a corner, where he'd be out of the range of flying bullets.

Then he went back to the house for Jackie. He hunted for her for some time before it dawned on him that she had gone. He went down to the stable and looked into the box stall where her black mare was kept. It was empty.

Hardin went to the bunkhouse with a weight like lead lying heavy in his stomach. It didn't seem possible that Jackie would sell them out—but a gal in love would do funny things. If Faulkner was warned in advance he wouldn't come ridin' head on into a load of shot.

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 106)
CHAPTER FOUR

Slash T Hole-Card

TIME dragged. Hardin and Slim watched at opposite ends of the bunkhouse while the rest of the crew tried to catch up on some sleep.

Hardin was worried; he felt rocky. His shoulder hurt like hell and every time he sat down he went to sleep, so he kept moving, his tired brain trying to figure a way out.

Now that Jackie was gone he could have told the waddies to get on their horses and ride off. But he wouldn't leave the old man flat on his back—and the trip into town would kill him.

He looked the waddies over as they slept; Tex and Chalkeye, Billy and Spider. Counting himself and Slim and the cook, who wasn't much with a gun, they made seven—and Faulkner and the sheriff had more than double that number!

Hardin reckoned that the old man had a pretty good chance of being killed anyway, but he swore that before he, himself, went out he'd take as many with him as he could.

"Here they come!" Slim sang out, and Hardin's nerves jumped and he didn't feel sleepy any more.

The cook banged on the stove with a stick of cordwood and the waddies sat up and rubbed the sleep from their eyes. "Seems like I just laid down," Chalkeye yawned, and hitched his belt into place.

They picked up rifles and stationed themselves, two at each side of the house.

"How many do you make out?" Hardin asked Slim.

"Looks to me like Garvey and his deputies," Slim answered. "I don't see nothin' of Faulkner and his bunch."

"Keep your eyes peeled, boys," Hardin said. "They might come in from the other side."

He beckoned to the cook. "Take my place here by the door. I want to see what's up." He handed him his rifle and joined Slim at the other end.

Garvey and his men whirled to a stop in a cloud of dust. Hardin opened the door while Slim poked a rifle through the narrow window.

Hot Lead Ransoms the Slash T

"You lookin' for somethin'?" Hardin inquired.

Garvey swung his red face at him. "Throw down yore guns and come out," he roared. "I'm arrestin' yuh fer murder—and the rest of the boys as accessories, fer hidin' yuh."

"We sort of like it here," Hardin drawled, "and I reckon we'll stay. Don't come no closer," he warned the sheriff, "less you want to stop lead!"

Garvey jerked his horse around. "Yuh've had yore chance," he bellowed, "now we'll smoke yuh out like a pack of rats."

A deputy flipped up his gun and Hardin jumped back as Slim's rifle crashed. The deputy swayed backward as though a strong wind had struck him, and rolled to the ground, his bullet knocking chips from the doorjamb. Hardin slammed the door shut and slid the bar into place as the gunfire rolled. Lead ripped into the building and tore off into space in screaming ricochets.

Hardin joined Slim at the window and they pumped lead, fast. The deputies scattered and spread out to encircle one end of the building; some took refuge behind the cookshack over at the side—but they left two of their number on the ground.

Suddenly the cook began firing out the front window. "It's Faulkner and his rustlers," the man bawled. The waddies at the sides of the building got into the fight now, and the bunkhouse resounded to the crash of guns, and smoke and the smell of burned powder hung heavy in the air.

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10 STORY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Old man Thorndyke propped himself up against the wall with a rifle clutched in his skinny hands. "Give 'em hell, boys!" he yelled.

Harding left the rear end to Slim and went over by the cook. Faulkner and his riders had joined forces with the deputies, who had spread out around the building, crouching behind anything that would shelter them, while they raked the windows with rifle fire.

The cook suddenly dropped his rifle and sat down while a red stain spread over the front of his shirt. Hardin dragged him to the protection of a corner and stuffed a wad of cloth over the hole, just under the shoulder.

Then he crouched by the side of the window. The attackers were pretty well concealed and Hardin was further handicapped by having to use his revolver. One of the enemy attempted to dodge from behind the shelter of a pile of cordwood to the cookshack. Hardin dropped him before he got half way. The others set up a return fire that drove him from the window.

◆ ◆ ◆

BULLETS were finding their way in through the windows at the sides, were whining across the room to crash into the peeled log walls. A lamp fell from the table with a crash of broken glass, the oil running out on the floor in a little stream.

Chalkeye went down as though smashed by a mighty hand, a hole between his staring eyes.

"Keep back from the windows," Hardin roared. "They can't get us out 'less they rush us and then we can cut 'em down. Hold your fire or you'll run out of shells."

The firing inside the house stopped. The firing outside continued for a while, then it too slackened. One deputy, emboldened by the silence, stood up and Slim drove a slug through his belly.

There was silence for a while and Hardin pulled Billy from the side to watch the front. He went over to the side nearest the cookshack. From beyond it there came a buzz of conversation.

"They're hatchin' up some kind of devil-

Hot Lead Ransoms the Slash T

ment," Spider said, mopping the sweat from his face.

"I reckon," nodded Hardin wearily. That stubborn streak within him was the only thing that kept him on his feet. His blood-shot eyes peered through the smoke-laden air. With the cook shot and Chalk-eye dead, there were only five men left. Slim's left ear had been nicked by a bullet and the side of his head was bloody, but he was still on his feet.

The firing started up again, this time concentrating on the front. Bullets pounded the logs and hummed through the window. Billy swore and clapped a hand to his shoulder. At the same time there came a rumbling and a wagon, loaded with sacks of feed, trundled out from behind the cookshack.

It came around in a half circle. Hardin raced to the front and dropped one of the men on the tongue and then it straightened out and headed for the door of the bunkhouse.

The rustlers had short-coupled the front and back wheels so that the heavy oak reach stuck out in back a good two feet. It headed down the slight slope, gaining speed as it came.

"Watch the front!" Hardin yelled—and then it struck!

The protruding end of the reach served as a battering ram and tore the door off its hinges with a shattering crash. Men streamed up over the wagon and the bunkhouse became pandemonium.

Some of the rustlers dropped but the rest crowded through the doorway, their guns flashing redly in the smoky haze.

The red face of Garvey, wearing a look of triumph, appeared at the window Spider had vacated. Hardin drove a shot at him and Garvey's face sank from view. His hands clutched at the window ledge and then slipped slowly off.

Hardin's leg went out from under him as a bullet smashed it. He emptied his gun and then through the smoke came a big figure, striding forward as though impervious to lead.

The fire from behind Hardin stopped suddenly. He looked up at the face of Faulkner. There was a cold smile on the dandy's face as he leveled his gun. Desperately, Hardin tried to roll aside. Then

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there was a shot from behind him and Faulkner swayed and pitched forward on his face.

A sudden burst of firing from outside mingled with shouts; the room miraculously cleared. Hardin turned his head to look back. Old Man Thorndyke was lowering a smoking rifle, a satisfied look on his lean old face. Slim was sitting down with blood dripping from his right arm and Tex was sagging against the wall. Men suddenly appeared at the doorway, and Thorndyke's rifle swept up.

"Hold it, yuh fire-eatin' old buzzard!" a man roared. Thorndyke dropped the rifle while a grin swept over his seamed face.

Other men crowded in now and Hardin saw that they were neighboring cattlemen. "We got the rest of 'em rounded up," said Tom Webb, the first man in. "Jackie come bustin' over to tell us what was happenin' and we rounded up a bunch of the boys and come afoggin' an' afannin'."

"Looks like we didn't get here none too soon," he added as his eyes swept the bunkhouse.

Hardin was propped in a chair by the time Jackie got in. She sent a swift look over to her dad and then came to Hardin.

"Are you all right, Rod?" she inquired anxiously, while her arms went around his neck.

Hardin could only nod.

"Now that Garvey and Faulkner are dead," she continued, "and the neighbors have the rest of the rustlers rounded up, things ought to be peaceful around Big Snowy."

Events had happened so fast that Hardin's weary brain was in a fog. "But Faulkner," he muttered. "I thought that you was sweet on him. . . ."

"I liked him," Jackie acknowledged, "because I thought he was being friendly and neighborly, but there's never been anyone else but you."

Hardin patted her hand while a great contentment filled him.

Over in the corner old man Thorndyke wiggled a foot. "Lookie," he crowed jubilantly, "I'm gittin' the power back into my legs! Mebbe," he continued with a grin, "it's the excitement of gittin' me a son-in-law."

THE END

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- ☐ Management of Inventions
- ☐ Marine Engine
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mine Foreman
- ☐ Navigation ☐ Patternmaking
- ☐ Plastics ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Public Works Engineering
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ R. R. Section Foreman
- ☐ R. R. Signaller ☐ Refrigeration

- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Sheet Metal Work
- ☐ Ship Drafting
- ☐ Shipfitting ☐ Shop Practice
- ☐ Steam Electric ☐ Steam Engine
- ☐ Steam Fitting
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping
- ☐ Telegraphy ☐ Telephony
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking ☐ Tool Design
- ☐ Welding, Gas and Electric
- ☐ Wooden Manufacturing

- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Cartooning ☐ Civil Service

- ☐ College Preparatory
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Commercial Illustrating
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ C. F. Accounting

- ### BUSINESS COURSES
- ☐ First Year College
 - ☐ Foremanship ☐ French
 - ☐ Good English
 - ☐ High School
 - ☐ Managing Men at Work

- ☐ Railway Postal Clerk
- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Secretarial ☐ Spanish
- ☐ Showcard and Sign Lettering
- ☐ Traffic Management

- ☐ Advanced Dressmaking
- ☐ Foods and Cookery

- ### HOME ECONOMICS COURSES
- ☐ Home Dressmaking
 - ☐ Professional Dressmaking and Designing

- ☐ Tea Room and Cafeteria Management, Catering

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